Table of Contents

1. Allegiances
2. Prologue
3. Chapter 1
4. Chapter 2
5. Chapter 3
6. Chapter 4
7. Chapter 5
8. Chapter 6
9. Chapter 7
10. Chapter 8
11. Chapter 9
12. Chapter 10
13. Allegiances Updated
14. Chapter 11
15. Chapter 12
16. Chapter 13
17. Chapter 14
18. Chapter 15
19. Chapter 16
20. Chapter 17
21. Chapter 18
22. Chapter 19
23. Chapter 20
24. Allegiances Updated
25. Chapter 21
26. Chapter 22
27. Chapter 23
28. Chapter 24
29. Chapter 25
30. Chapter 26
31. Chapter 27
32. Chapter 28
33. Chapter 29
34. Chapter 30

35. Sequel

Allegiances

[image]

TigerClan
Leader-Tigerstar: large, dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes and unusually sharp claws
Deputy-Darkstripe: dark tabby tom with black stripes
Healer-Cinderpelt: dark gray she-cat
Warriors-
-Halftail: big dark brown tabby tom with part of his tail missing
-Smallear: gray tom with very small ears, the oldest tom in TigerClan
-Patchpelt: small black and white tom
-One-eye: pale gray she-cat, the oldest cat in TigerClan, virtually blind and deaf
-Dappletail: once pretty tortoiseshell she-cat with a lovely dappled coat
-Whitestorm: big white tom
-Longtail: pale tabby tom with dark stripes
-Willowpelt: pale gray she-cat with blue eyes
-Runningwind: swift tabby tom
-Mousefur: small dusky brown she-cat
-Brindleface: pretty tabby she-cat
-Brackenfur: golden-brown tabby tom
-Dustpelt: dark brown tabby tom
-Swiftwind: black and white tom
-Brightflower: white she-cat with ginger patches
-Thornclaw: golden-brown tabby tom
Apprentices-
-Fernpaw: pale gray she-cat with darker flecks and pale green eyes (mentor-Darkstripe)
-Ashpaw: pale gray tom with darker flecks and dark blue eyes (mentor-Dustpelt)
-Sootpaw: dark gray tom with amber eyes (mentor-Longtail)
-Rainpaw: black tom (mentor-Swiftwind)
-Sorrelpaw: tortoiseshell and white she-cat (mentor-Brackenfur)
Queens-

-Frostfur: white she-cat with blue eyes
-Goldenflower: pale ginger she-cat (mother to Tigerstar's kits: Bramblekit and Tawnykit)
-Sandstorm: pale ginger she-cat with green eyes (mother to Hopekit, Owlkit, and Maplekit)
Kits-
-Bramblekit: dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes (mother: Goldenflower)
-Tawnykit: tortoiseshell she-cat (mother-Goldenflower)
-Hopekit: long-haired russet she-kit with a dark dorsal stripe and green eyes (mother-Sandstorm)
-Owlkit: light brown tabby tom with green eyes (mother-Sandstorm)
-Maplekit: ginger and white she-kit (mother-Sandstorm)

ShadowClan
Leader-Blackstar: large white tom with huge jet black paws
Deputy-Russetfur: dark ginger she-cat
Medicine Cat-Runningnose: small gray and white tom
Warriors-
-Oakfur: small brown tom
-Stumpytail: brown tabby tom
-Wetfoot: gray tabby tom
-Fawnstep: ginger she-cat with white flecks
-Littlecloud: very small tabby tom
-Darkflower: black she-cat
-Boulder: silver tabby tom, formerly a rogue
-Whitethroat: black tom with white chest and paws
-Jaggedtooth: huge tabby tom
Apprentices-
-Cedarpaw: dark brown tabby tom (mentor-Russetfur)
-Rowanpaw: ginger tabby tom (mentor-Jaggedtooth)
Queens-
-Dawncloud: small tabby she-cat
-Tallpoppy: long-legged, light brown tabby she-cat
-Petalnose: tortoiseshell she-cat (mother to Whitethroat's kits: Ravenkit, Cloverkit, and Hollykit)
Kits-
-Ravenkit: black tom (mother-Petalnose)
-Cloverkit: black and white she-kit with green eyes (mother-Petalnose)

-Hollykit: light gray and white tabby she-kit (mother-Petalnose)
Elders-None

RiverClan
Leader-Crookedstar: huge light-colored tabby tom with a twisted jaw
Deputy-Leopardfur: unusually golden spotted she-cat
Medicine Cat-Mudfur: long-haired light brown tabby tom
Warriors-
-Blackclaw: smoky black tom
-Stonefur: gray tom with battle-scarred ears
-Mistyfoot: dark gray she-cat
-Briarnose: long-haired tortoiseshell she-cat
-Loudbelly: dark brown tom
-Heavystep: thickset tabby tom
-Shadepelt: very dark gray she-cat
-Graystripe: long-haired gray tom, formerly of ThunderClan
Apprentices-
-Featherpaw: long-haired silver tabby she-cat with blue eyes (mentor-Mistyfoot)
-Stormpaw: dark gray tom with amber eyes (mentor-Stonefur)
Queens-
-Mosspelt: tortoiseshell she-cat
Kits-None
Elders-
-Graypool: thin gray she-cat with patchy fur and a scarred muzzle

WindClan
Leader-Tallstar: black and white tom with a long tail
Deputy-Deadfoot: black tom with twisted paw
Medicine Cat-Barkface: short-tailed brown tom
Warriors-
-Mudclaw: mottled dark brown tom
-Webfoot: dark gray tabby tom
-Tornear: tabby tom
-Tawnyfur: golden brown she-cat
-Breezetail: cream-colored she-cat with blue eyes
-Onewhisker: light brown tabby tom
-Runningbrook: light gray she-cat
Apprentices-

-Gorsepaw: long-legged brown tabby tom (mentor-Breezetail)
Queens-
-Ashfoot: gray tabby she-cat (mother to Deadfoot's kit: Crowkit)
-Morningflower: tortoiseshell she-cat
-Whitetail: small white she-cat (mother to Onewhisker's kits: Skykit and Cloudkit)
Kits-
-Crowkit: black tom with blue eyes (mother-Ashfoot)
-Skykit: blue-gray she-kit (mother-Whitetail)
-Cloudkit: white tom (mother-Whitetail)
Elders-None

Cats Outside the Clans
-Barley: black and white tom that lives on a farm close to the forest
-Ravenpaw: sleek black cat who lives on the farm with Barley
-Butterfly: golden tabby she-cat
-Free: long-haired gray tom with a dark dorsal stripe and green eyes
-Rosie: tortoiseshell and white she-kit
-Sunny: golden tabby tom
-Maisie: black she-kit with white paws

Prologue

[image]

Tigerclaw stood on the Highrock overlooking the clan. In the center of the clearing, Bluestar and Fireheart's bodies rested side by side. The intimidating dark tabby tom leaped down from the Highrock and dipped his head in mourning.

"Fireheart betrayed our clan's trust. He killed Bluestar, but he also destroyed a small part of ourselves." Tigerclaw raised his head high as the clan looked to him for direction. "But I solemnly swear that I will avenge Bluestar's death. Fireheart has proven that kittypets do not belong in our world."

"Anyone who shows even the slightest amount of disloyalty will be executed." With a flick of his tail, Longtail and Darkstripe dragged Cloudpaw from the crowd. The clan screamed in an uproar.

Whitestorm stood out as the voice of reason. "Tigerclaw, you can't kill Cloudpaw, he's done nothing wrong!"

"He shares Fireheart's blood, he was born a kittypet and that makes him a traitor." Tigerclaw pulled his lips back in a fierce snarl. "Kill him."

"No!" Sandstorm tried to throw herself in between the two warriors and the helpless apprentice. Darkstripe hit Sandstorm across the face with unsheathed claws, sending her tumbling into the dirt. Immediately, Sandstorm stood up, ready to retaliate.

Whitestorm blocked the young she-cat's path. "No, Sandstorm. Tigerclaw will kill you if you get in his way."

"I can't let them kill Cloudpaw!" Sandstorm snarled. "No matter what Tigerclaw says, Fireheart was *not* a traitor!"

Tigerclaw appeared and smacked Sandstorm with his paw. "Never repeat that name, unless you would disgrace Bluestar?"

Sandstorm stared into Tigerclaw's eyes, and there she found the eyes of a predator, a killer. She held his stare for a few heartbeats before she lowered her head. "Yes, Tigerclaw."

Tigerclaw gave Darkstripe the signal and Sandstorm watched as Darkstripe slit Cloudpaw's throat. She watched the white apprentice's fur stain red and crimson droplets fell onto the dirt. Cloudpaw collapsed and the clan wailed in despair.

Then, Tigerclaw proceeded to leap onto Highrock. "I am the leader of ThunderClan now, but I've made a decision. We will no longer be called ThunderClan. Our strong clan deserves a more powerful name, one that will make our enemies quake in fear. We will be called *Tiger*Clan."

Chapter 1

[image]

The morning air that whirled through the trees just outside the den woke Hopekit from her sleep. She lifted her russet head and opened her forest green eyes. At her side, her brother and sister, Owlkit and Maplekit, still slept. Their mother, Sandstorm, snored softly-signaling to Hopekit that she was asleep as well.

Hopekit stood up and stretched out her legs before slipping out of the nursery. Light blinded her, but once her eyes adjusted she looked around the camp clearing. Warriors sat clustered in small groups whispering to each other. She pricked her ears and stalked forward, eager to hear what they were saying.

"Hopekit," Fernpaw noticed her and approached the young russet she-kit. "What are you doing outside of the nursery?"

Hopekit flattened her ears and studied her paws. "I just wanted to go outside." Her forest-green gaze traveled to the camp entrance which stood as the only obstacle between her and the forest.

Fernpaw giggled, "I'm sure that you can wait until your apprentice ceremony. That's only three moons away."

"I want to go outside the camp now." Hopekit complained with a slight whine. Her adventurous spirit employed her to explore.

Just then, Sandstorm emerged from the nursery. Seeing her kit, she bounded over. "Hopekit, there you are!" The pale ginger she-cat nosed her daughter carefully, looking for signs of injury. "Make sure you ask before leaving the nursery."

"Sorry, mother." Hopekit mumbled. "I just wanted to explore."

Sandstorm licked her fiercely. "You can explore when you're an apprentice. Until then, you will let me dote on you as much as I like."

"Aw, come on Sandstorm." Dustpelt called teasingly from the other side of the clearing. "You could give her a little freedom!"

Sandstorm looked down at Hopekit with calculating green eyes. "Fine, but stay in the camp."

"Can we go, too?" Owlkit and Maplekit appeared from the nursery, their eyes wide at the prospect of exploring camp.

"Yes, and stay together. Don't get under anyone's paws!" Sandstorm warned as she watched her three kits race off.

"Race you!" Hopekit exclaimed gleefully. The three littermates raced across the camp, dodging warriors and apprentices. Hopekit reached the other side first and let out a triumphant cry. "I won!"

Owlkit shook his light brown tabby head then shoved his sister. "You had a head start!"

"Did not, it was a fair race!" Hopekit argued, digging her claws into the dirt.

"Don't fight," Maplekit whined. "Please." The small ginger and white she-kit coughed and trembled.

Hopekit touched her nose to her sister's cheek. "Okay, Maplekit. Let's play a better game."

"Like hide and seek?" Maplekit asked hopefully.

Owlkit groaned and rolled his eyes. "Warriors don't play hide and seek. They play real games like moss-ball or invasion."

Hopekit shot her brother a fierce glare. He didn't have much sympathy for their sickly littermate. Composing herself, Hopekit turned to Maplekit. "We can play hide and seek if that's what you want. I'll count and you two can hide."

She closed her eyes and allowed Maplekit and Owlkit to race off and hide. Hopekit counted out loud. "One...two...three..."

Suddenly, someone crashed into her from behind and pinned her

down. When she opened her eyes, she was looking into the golden-amber eyes of Bramblekit. "Ha! I pinned you!" Bramblekit boasted.

Hopekit slipped from his grasp and jumped at him. They tussled for a little while before she remembered that she had to go seek Owlkit and Maplekit. "Not now, Bramblekit. I have to find Owlkit and Maplekit."

"Are you playing hide and seek?" Bramblekit scoffed.

Hopekit became defensive. It wasn't Maplekit's fault that she couldn't keep up with any other games! Besides, Hopekit didn't mind playing hide and seek, it allowed her to practice her tracking skills...although her littermates weren't the best hiders.

"Yeah, so what if we are playing hide and seek?" Hopekit growled in defense. She didn't want Bramblekit to think she was a baby. "Excuse me, I have two littermates to find." She stomped away only for Bramblekit to block her way.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to be rude." Bramblekit muttered, avoiding her gaze. "I'll help you look."

Hopekit nodded, "Okay, hurry up!" She raced off with Bramblekit on her tail. They soon found Owlkit hiding up a tree and Maplekit tucked away in the grass.

"Now what?" Owlkit wondered, flicking his tail in annoyance.

"Let's play invasion!" Bramblekit suggested just as Tawnykit appeared from the nursery.

"Invasion?" Tawnykit rolled her green eyes. "Why don't we see if one of the warriors will show us a few battle moves?" The tortoiseshell she-kit squeaked.

Hopekit noticed Sootkit, Sorrelkit, and Rainkit emerging from the nursery. Beside them was their mother, Willowpelt. She watched as Willowpelt's mate, Whitestorm, met his family at the center of the clearing. The big white tom looked worried.

"What's going on?" Hopekit spoke her worries out loud to her

friends.

Bramblekit raised his head and watched them with mild interest. "Looks like my father is naming them apprentices."

"They're only four moons old!" Maplekit cried in protest, her green eyes were wide with fear.

Tawnykit lowered her head. "Tigerstar is changing the Warrior Code."

"What?!" Hopekit cried with outrage. "He can't just *change* the Warrior Code!"

"Tigerstar says that certain laws in the warrior code make the clans weak." Bramblekit piped up and puffed his chest out proudly. "He says that apprentices should train younger and elders should serve longer."

Hopekit noticed movement from the Highrock just in time to see Tigerstar leap up and call the clan to order. "Let those old enough to hunt gather beneath the Highrock for a clan meeting."

Warriors and apprentices, queens and elders, all emerged from their dens to gather. Hopekit followed Bramblekit and Tawnykit to the Highrock with Owlkit and Maplekit right behind her. They settled at the base of the Highrock where they had a good view of everything.

"It's been moons, almost an entire season, since Fireheart's traitorous acts and Bluestar's death." Tigerstar's voice boomed across camp, loud and commanding for all to hear. His amber eyes surveyed the clan before continuing. "Change is coming to TigerClan. Our clan is the strongest clan in the forest, and we require more territory. At the next Gathering, I am going to ask ShadowClan for holdings within their territory." The clearing erupted with angry yowls and cries of outrage.

"That's against the Warrior Code!" Mousefur yowled. Other cats added their agreement and they didn't stop until Tigerstar silenced them with a twitch of his tail.

"The Warrior Code doesn't apply to TigerClan anymore. We are stronger than the other clans and they will soon see that." Tigerstar turned his eyes to the Sootkit, Sorrelkit, and Rainkit. "On a happier note, we have three kits who are ready to become apprentices." He called them forward and Hopekit watched as the clan tensed.

"Sootkit, Sorrelkit, and Rainkit, until you earn your warrior names," Tigerstar raised his head. "You will be known as Sootpaw, Sorrelpaw, and Rainpaw." Tigerstar's amber eyes searched the clan. "Longtail will train Sootpaw, Swiftwind will train Rainpaw, and Brackenfur will train Sorrelpaw."

This is where the clan should've cheered. This is where they welcomed the new apprentices and congratulated them on their first rite of passage. But the clearing was dead silent. Not one cat raised their voice in happiness.

Hopekit tensed and glanced at the newly named Sootpaw, Rainpaw, and Sorrelpaw. Her heart went out to them, but she didn't feel right cheering when the rest of the clan appeared so somber. At her side, Bramblekit was silent and hardly moved.

Sootpaw, Rainpaw, and Sorrelpaw leaped down from the Highrock, clearly humiliated. Hopekit wanted to say something to them, but what? It wasn't their fault that Tigerstar used them as the first pawns in his game.

"Hopekit, Owlkit, Maplekit..." Sandstorm appeared from the crowd. Her green eyes were dark and solemn. "It's time for your nap."

Chapter 2

[image]

The morning seemed different somehow, almost as if the entire forest had changed overnight. Hopekit peeked outside the nursery and noticed Goldenflower sitting with Tigerstar beneath Highrock. Tigerstar murmured something to Goldenflower that caused her to flatten her ears. Hopekit wondered for a fleeting moment what Tigerstar might've said to her. Close by, Bramblekit and Tawnykit tussled in the dirt, oblivious to their parents' bickering.

Much of the clan still slept except for the dawn patrol. The patrol consisted of Darkstripe (the clan deputy), Whitestorm, Dappletail, Brindleface, and Fernpaw. Hopekit watched the warriors and Fernpaw leave the camp, silently wishing that she could join with them. She desperately wanted to explore the forest, to really stretch her legs and feel the grass beneath her paws.

When Hopekit glanced back over her shoulder, she noted that Maplekit and Owlkit were still sleeping, as was Sandstorm. There was no one to stop her from following the patrol. Hopekit considered tailing them but decided against it-Owlkit would never forgive her if she left him behind.

She emerged from the nursery and stalked across camp. Cinderpelt appeared from the healer den and Hopekit noticed her slow progress with her crippled leg. She remembered the first time she met Cinderpelt and Sandstorm had to explain how she was hit by a monster on the thunderpath as an apprentice. Hopekit bounded towards the healer.

"Cinderpelt, can I help with something?" Hopekit asked excitedly. She was awfully bored waiting for her littermates to wake up.

The dark gray she-cat thought for a moment before she nodded and answered: "Yes, why don't you help me sort through the herbs in my den? Go through them all and throw the old herbs out."

Hopekit nodded eagerly, "Yes Cinderpelt!" She dashed off towards the medicine cat den and slipped inside. The last time she'd been in here was when Owlkit clawed her ear by accident.

The little russet she-kit started to go through each pile of herbs and threw out the ones that seemed dry or frail. She continued like this for a while and didn't even notice Cinderpelt return. In her jaws she carefully carried new herbs.

"That's good, Hopekit. You can go now if you'd like." Cinderpelt laid down the herbs she was carrying and nodded to her.

Hopekit dipped her head respectively before exiting the den. Outside she found Owlkit wrestling with Bramblekit while Tawnykit talked with Maplekit. Their mothers, Goldenflower and Sandstorm, spoke in quiet voices along with Frostfur. She pricked her ears with mild curiosity but couldn't hear what they were saying.

Hopekit stalked towards the two wrestling toms and she pounced on Owlkit. "Haha! I caught you!"

Owlkit batted at his sister and shoved her off. "Go away, Hopekit! Why don't you go play with Cinderpelt since you're so fond of healer duties!"

Hopekit growled and pinned Owlkit down. She curled back her lips to show her sharp fangs. "Take. That. Back!"

Owlkit narrowed his green eyes. "No."

Snarling, Hopekit slashed Owlkit across the muzzle and she would've swung at him again if it weren't for Bramblekit dragging her off of him. "Let me go!" Hopekit howled, swatting at Bramblekit.

Sandstorm and Goldenflower hurried over and Sandstorm gasped when she saw Owlkit's bleeding muzzle. "What's going on?! Owlkit,what happened?"

"Hopekit clawed me!" Owlkit growled. He narrowed his eyes at her angrily.

Sandstorm turned on Hopekit, a look of fierce disappointment in

her eyes. "Is this true, Hopekit?"

Hopekit's fur pricked at the look Sandstorm gave her. "So what if it is? He said that I should be a dumb healer rather than a warrior!"

The pale ginger she-cat sighed. "Both of you, back in the nursery now. And Owlkit, go to Cinderpelt and see what she can do about your muzzle."

Hopekit slunk away and paused by Maplekit. "Come on," she grumbled to her sister. The pair headed back to the nursery.

Maplekit crawled back into the nest, but Hopekit wasn't prepared to lay down so quick. Sandstorm entered the nursery and Hopekit raised her eyes to look at her mother. The pale ginger she-cat studied her daughter before nuzzling her shoulder.

"What were you thinking, Hopekit?" Sandstorm sighed. "You could've hurt Owlkit."

"Tigerstar always says that a warrior who doesn't fight is no warrior at all." Hopekit pointed out. "I want to be a warrior, not a mouse-hearted healer!"

"And you will be a warrior, Hopekit." Sandstorm promised, "But you can't go around hurting whoever annoys you."

Hopekit slouched and pouted. "Why is Tigerstar changing TigerClan so much? You told me that TigerClan wasn't always like this."

Sandstorm curled around Hopekit and nuzzled her daughter gently. "No, TigerClan used to be known as ThunderClan, but that was before you were ever conceived."

"Bramblekit says that Tigerstar made the clan stronger, that we were weaker as ThunderClan." Hopekit noted, remembering the day the dark brown tabby tom told her that.

Sandstorm sighed, "So much has changed since then. Did you know that in the other clans, a healer is called a medicine cat?"

Hopekit shook her head, "No, but Cinderpelt told me once that she

was training to be a medicine cat, not a healer. What's the difference?"

"A medicine cat is not just a healer, but more." Sandstorm spoke wistfully. "They are spiritual leaders within the clan, a connection to StarClan."

"StarClan?" Hopekit squeaked. "Tigerstar says that we aren't allowed to mention StarClan."

"No," Sandstorm replied bitterly. "Tigerstar has changed us so much." The pale ginger she-cat looked down at Hopekit. "We need to have hope, Hopekit, that the future holds something better and brighter than what we have now. Do you understand?"

Hopekit shrugged, "I suppose, but it don't see how an imaginary clan in the sky can make us stronger."

Sandstorm's green eyes gained a faraway look, one resembling pain. "I suppose you would see it that way-you don't know any different." Sandstorm nuzzled Hopekit again. "Go play with Bramblekit and Tawnykit."

Hopekit purred and reached up to touch her mother's nose with her own. "I love you, mother."

"And I love you, Hopekit, you and your littermates." Sandstorm purred. "Now get going."

Hopekit squealed and raced out of the nursery. She found the two older kits tumbling in the dirt. The long-haired ginger she-kit dashed over to them and joined in their game.

Chapter 3

[image]

Half a moon passed, and Hopekit woke one morning to find the clan gathered for a meeting. Hopekit slunk towards where Owlkit and Maplekit sat in the shadows. She settled in between her littermates and turned her curious green gaze to Tigerstar.

"What's happening?" Hopekit asked Owlkit.

Owlkit huffed, "Bramblekit and Tawnykit are being named apprentices." He cast a glare in their direction. "Why can't we be named apprentices, too? We are only a moon younger than they are!"

"Then we'll be made apprentices in a moon, so hush up!" Hopekit snapped and returned her attention to the gathering.

Tigerstar stepped onto Highrock, the sun dappling his dark brown tabby pelt. His amber gaze surveyed the clan before his son and daughter joined him on Highrock. "Bramblekit, until you earn your warrior name, you will be known as Bramblepaw." Tigerstar announced. Lifting his head, he added, "And I will be your mentor."

"Of course," Hopekit heard Mousefur mutter under her breath to Dustpelt, "Did anyone expect anything less?"

"And Tawnykit, until you earn your warrior name, you will be known as Tawnypaw." Tigerstar searched for a particular face among the crowd. "Runningwind, you will be mentor to Tawnypaw."

"Bramblepaw! Tawnypaw!" The clan cheered, and Hopekit joined in along with her littermates.

Although she was cheering for them, she also cheered because she knew in a moon's time that she would become an apprentice. Hopekit loudly called Bramblepaw and Tawnypaw's names,

honestly happy for her former denmates. She watched as Goldenflower congratulated her two kits with enthusiasm.

"And another announcement," Tigerstar cleared his throat. "Tonight is the gathering and I will be bringing Darkstripe, Whitestorm, Dappletail, Longtail, Brackenfur, Mousefur, Brightflower, Ashpaw, and Fernpaw. That's all for now."

Hopekit and her littermates emerged from their hiding place in the shadows. "Wow, a gathering!" Hopekit exclaimed. "I bet the other clans will be there and everything!" Her eyes lit up with excitement at the prospect of meeting cats from the other clans.

"I wish we were going," Owlkit mumbled. He cast a sidelong glance at the older pair of littermates. "Ashpaw and Fernpaw get to go."

"But they're moons older than us," Maplekit reminded them softly. A cough shook her frail body. "We'll be apprentices soon."

Hopekit pouted, "Not soon enough." She padded across the clearing to where Bramblepaw and Tawnypaw stood. Other members of the clan were also gathered there, saying their congratulations.

Bramblepaw laughed at something Longtail said, but then his amber eyes found Hopekit. "Excuse me." He walked over to Hopekit and purred. "I can't believe I'm an apprentice! Soon I'll be a warrior! I wonder what my warrior name will be?"

Hopekit put on a good face for Bramblepaw to hide her jealousy. "That's great, Bramblepaw." Her voice shook slightly.

"What's wrong?" Bramblepaw nosed her. "Aren't you happy for me?"

"Of course I'm happy for you," Hopekit sighed, drawing circles in the dirt with her claw, "But now you'll be off doing apprentice things and you won't have time for us anymore."

Bramblepaw chuckled and shook his dark tabby head. His amber eyes glowed as he spoke, "I'm not going anywhere, Hopekit. I'll be just on the other side of camp."

"Hopekit, come on!" Owlkit called. He nodded to where their sister

waited. "Maplekit and I are going to play a game!"

"You should go," Bramblepaw turned and went back to join the other apprentices and warriors. Hopekit watched him go and wished that she were joining him. But instead she padded after her littermates, telling herself that her time would come soon enough.

"What are we playing?" Hopekit asked Owlkit and Maplekit.

"Let's go see Halftail and One-eye!" Maplekit exclaimed with her tail flickering in excitement. "Maybe they'll tell us a story!"

"No!" Owlkit groaned, "I don't want to hear another dumb story!"

"Come on," Hopekit playfully shoved Owlkit, "It'll be fun!" She led the way across the clearing where the senior warriors slept. Peering inside, she saw Halftail, One-eye, and Smallear.

"Oh!" Halftail said, surprised. "Hello kits!"

"Hi Halftail," the three kits greeted in unison.

"Have you come to hear a story?" Smallear wondered.

Hopekit and Maplekit nodded eagerly while Owlkit didn't say anything at all. "Yes, please!"

"Alright, settle down kits." Halftail cleared his throat and began the story. "I remember this day just like it was yesterday: Bluestar and Lionheart were on patrol with an apprentice named Graypaw. They were patrolling along the twoleg fence when Graypaw came across a kittypet."

"So? A kittypet can't hurt anyone." Owlkit rolled his eyes.

"Oh, but this kittypet did." Halftail retorted. "Graypaw attacked the kittypet, but the kittypet fought back! Bluestar and Lionheart saw the whole thing. That's when they made an offer to the kittypet-join ThunderClan."

"What?!" The kits cried with outrage. Owlkit argued further, "Kittypets can't be warriors!"

Halftail waited a heartbeat before continuing. "The kittypet's name was Rusty, and he did indeed join the clan. Bluestar gave him the name Firepaw." Halftail lowered his head. "No one could've imagined that Firepaw would grow into a ruthless traitor. His warrior name was Fireheart; no one saw the darkness in his heart. Bluestar was the one who paid the ultimate price for her foolishness."

"Tigerstar is the only one that saw past those friendly green eyes to the traitor underneath. But he couldn't save Bluestar..." Halftail sighed. "Enough stories, go play a game."

"Thanks for the story, Halftail." Hopekit purred and then she followed Owlkit and Maplekit outside.

"Fireheart really was a monster." Maplekit whispered and then shivered. "I wonder whatever happened to that apprentice, Graypaw?"

"I hear the warriors talking sometimes," Hopekit whispered so no one would hear. "Whitestorm says his name is Graystripe and he left the clan to be with his kits in RiverClan."

"Turns out ThunderClan bred traitors." Owlkit noted in a dark tone. "TigerClan can only have good, loyal warriors." He raised his head proudly. "I would die for TigerClan and Tigerstar."

"Me too!" Hopekit added.

Maplekit purred, "We're going to be the best warriors that TigerClan has ever seen!"

"Grr, I'm Fireheart!" Hopekit cried and she pounced on Owlkit. "I'll kill you Tigerstar!"

"Never! You're a fox-hearted traitor!" Owlkit cried gleefully, playing into the game. The two kits wrestled for the upper hand while Maplekit looked on. Owlkit pinned Hopekit down and pretended to slit her throat. "I've killed Fireheart and saved our clan from destruction!"

Little did they know how morbid their innocent game really was.

Chapter 4

[image]

Hopekit watched the clan prepare to leave for the Gathering. Tigerstar stood at the front with Darkstripe and Longtail at his side. The other warriors milled around them, whispering to each other. She noticed that Ashpaw and Fernpaw looked slightly out of place, but she imagined they were excited to be going.

"I wish I was going with them." Sorrelpaw sighed as she sat beside Hopekit.

"Me too," Hopekit agreed. "Have you seen any cats from other clans?" She imagined they must appear so much more intimidating face to face.

Sorrelpaw nodded, "Yes, but only glimpses on patrols."

Sorrelpaw's brothers, Sootpaw and Rainpaw, padded over to join them. "Hi Hopekit," Rainpaw meowed.

"Hi Rainpaw," Hopekit sighed. "I wish I could be an apprentice already. I'm about four moons old," Hopekit growled in frustration. Then she got an idea. "Maybe you could show me a few battle moves?" Hopekit suggested to the three apprentices.

"Me too!" Owlkit appeared at the mere mention of battle. "I want to learn how to fight!"

"You have to wait until you're an apprentice." Sootpaw reminded them. "Besides, shouldn't you be off to your nests?"

Hopekit sighed, crestfallen. "So?"

She turned around to return to the nursery as night started to befall the camp. Owlkit followed her inside where they found Sandstorm curled around Maplekit. "She couldn't sleep," Sandstorm told her two kits.

Hopekit studied her sleeping sister. "Why can't we be apprentices yet?" She asked Sandstorm.

"Actually, I have good news regarding that." Sandstorm purred. "Tomorrow, you and Owlkit will be named apprentices."

Hopekit squealed with excitement and bounced around. "Did you hear that Owlkit! We're going to be apprentices!" But suddenly, she realized something. "What about Maplekit?"

Sandstorm's green eyes filled with sadness. "Tigerstar says she's not healthy enough to be an apprentice, at least not yet. She'll be named in a half moon or so."

Hopekit hesitated. "Have you told her?" She motioned to sleeping Maplekit.

Sandstorm nodded her pale ginger head. "Yes, she knows. She didn't take the news very well."

"Now I feel bad..." Hopekit muttered, lowering her head with guilt.

Owlkit didn't pause a moment to think about Maplekit. "Don't feel bad," Owlkit huffed. "We're going to be apprentices!"

Hopekit smiled, unable to hide her excitement despite the circumstances. "I'll make you proud, mother."

Sandstorm purred, nuzzling Hopekit. "I know you will, Hopekit."

Hopekit settled in the nest beside Owlkit. Her heart was light and she dreamed about being a warrior. She saw herself fighting in battle, hunting lots of prey, and exploring the forest. Tomorrow couldn't come soon enough.

~

When Hopekit emerged from the nursery, she heard the clamor of her clanmates conversing with one another. Something important was happening, perhaps something from the Gathering the night before? She dashed over to Bramblepaw and Tawnypaw, hoping that they might know something.

"What happened last night?" She whispered.

"Tigerstar asked ShadowClan for land, but Blackstar refused him. Then Tigerstar ordered TigerClan to attack! They returned with a ShadowClan apprentice as hostage until ShadowClan agrees to Tigerstar's conditions!" Tawnypaw explained rapidly and excitedly.

Hopekit's green eyes widened. "A real life ShadowClan cat? What's their name?"

"His name's Rowanpaw," Bramblepaw answered. "He's a little older than Tawnypaw and I."

Just then, Tigerstar emerged from the leader's den and leaped onto the Highrock to call the clan. "As I'm sure many of you know, after ShadowClan refused to agree to our terms, we've taken one of their apprentices hostage. Rowanpaw won't be returning to ShadowClan until Blackstar agrees to give us territory."

"On a happier note," Tigerstar cleared his throat, his amber eyes gleaming. "Two kits need to be named apprentices."

Hopekit walked forward with Owlkit at her side. They stood tall and ready for their names. "Hopekit until you draw blood like a warrior, you will be called Hopepaw. Your mentor will be Thornclaw." The clan started to talk, surprised at the sudden change in the ceremony. Hopepaw cowered at the sudden uproar. What was she supposed to do?

"Those aren't the right words, Tigerstar!" Dappletail shouted.

Tigerstar silenced the clan with a lash of his tail. "Times are changing, and with TigerClan comes new words. TigerClan is stronger than any of the other clans."

"StarClan will shun all of TigerClan for this!" Smallear screeched. "First you've changed ThunderClan's name, started training kits as apprentices, captured a ShadowClan apprentice and now you're changing the ceremonies? You've condemned all of *Thunder*Clan to a life of walking shadows!"

Without warning, Hopepaw watched as Tigerstar leaped down from

the Highrock and pounced on the senior warrior. He slashed Smallear's throat with his claws and drew them back to reveal the crimson blood dripping from his claws. Cats scream and stared, frozen in place without any idea of how to react. Hopepaw's jaw dropped in shock but she couldn't look away.

From the crowd, Cinderpelt lurched forward to Smallear's side. She looked up at Tigerstar with horrified eyes. "You've killed him!"

Tigerstar slapped Cinderpelt, throwing her to the ground. "Watch your tongue, *healer*, or I'll rip it from your throat!" He leaped back onto Highrock, his claws still dripping with blood. "With TigerClan accomplishing such great feats, we need to expand our clan. I've decided that each she-cat will produce at least one litter of kits in their lifetime," He turned his cold, amber eyes on Cinderpelt, "Including healers." He nodded to Hopepaw to go to Thornclaw, and she obeyed, frightened out of her mind.

Hopepaw touched noses with the golden-brown tom and sat down quietly. She felt great turmoil in her heart. Was she a true apprentice if Tigerstar hadn't used the proper words? What would happen to her? Would StarClan, if it existed, accept her as a kit rather than a warrior when she passed?!

"Owlkit, until you draw blood like a warrior, you will be known as Owlpaw. Your mentor will be Whitestorm." Tigerstar announced and he leaped down from the Highrock. The clan didn't cheer their names and Hopepaw felt rejected. What would happen now?

Dappletail, One-eye, and much of the clan gathered around Smallear to grieve. Hopepaw could only stare in horror. There was so much blood and it stained the sand underpaw.

"Come on," Thornclaw growled gruffly. "Let's teach you how to fight."

She followed her mentor out of camp gratefully and they climbed the ravine. Hopepaw managed to scramble up the ravine after Thornclaw. The forest was so big, she realized. Overhead, the trees touched the sky and the forest stretched on past the shadows. Her eyes widened in amazement at the sights and sounds around her.

Thornclaw took her along the path towards what Hopepaw assumed would be the Sandy Hollow. She heard Bramblepaw and Tawnypaw talk about it before. The undergrowth parted to reveal a clearing in which the ground was made up entirely of sand.

"Let's start with basic offensive and defensive moves." Thornclaw decided with a slight tremor in his voice. Without warning, he sat down and lowered his head.

"T-Thornclaw are you okay?" Hopepaw asked gently.

"I'm fine, Hopepaw." Thornclaw growled and he stood back up. "The easiest way to avoid your enemy is to dodge. It's really simple, all you do is move to the side, dive, or jump over them." He suddenly dived at her and Hopepaw reacted on instinct. She dived underneath Thornclaw and appeared behind him.

"Good, Hopepaw." Thornclaw nodded. "Now try something offensive. Charge at me and try to tag me, okay?"

Hopepaw nodded and crouched down. She eyed Thronclaw's stance and saw how he balanced more on his right side. She dodged forward and Thornclaw tried to dive right, but she managed to tag his shoulder. "I did it!"

Thornclaw smiled, "You've got good instincts, Hopepaw. Now try this."

They practiced until the sun slipped behind the horizon. Hopepaw caught on quickly and fought as hard as she could. Her heart was full and warm from all the praise she received and she felt that she was that much closer to becoming a warrior...

Chapter 5

[image]

The days that followed impacted the clan in new ways. Tigerstar made sure that no cat stepped out of line and anyone who whispered even one wrong word was punished. It led much of the clan to stay quiet and ignored the wrongdoings that happened.

Hopepaw woke early and stepped out of the apprentice den. Most of the warriors were still sleeping, but she noticed Tigerstar speaking with Darkstripe in hushed voices beneath Highrock. She watched them for a moment with intense green eyes. Seeing them made her ponder what was happening to the clan.

Sandstorm seemed awfully wistful these last few days and Hopepaw wondered what was bothering her mother. Smallear's death was a shock, but he had spoken treasonous words. She could understand Tigerstar's viewpoint in needing only loyal warriors, but killing couldn't be the answer-could it?

Suddenly, Thornclaw emerged from the warriors den and noticed Hopepaw right away. "Hopepaw, we are going hunting."

"I want to fight!" Hopepaw complained. "I don't want to spend my morning catching pitiful little animals for clanmates that can't catch their own!"

Thornclaw scowled at Hopepaw. "Oh? And who would you have feed them? Would you let them starve?"

"No..." Hopepaw studied her paws, realizing how horrible that sounded. "But can't someone else do that?"

Thornclaw stood up and started to walk away. "No, no apprentice of mine is going to turn into an entitled kittypet."

Hopepaw sighed and followed the golden-brown warrior out of camp. She knew that Owlpaw would be learning to fight today.

Bramblepaw and Tawnypaw would probably be practicing battle. Why couldn't she? Of all the mentors she could've had, she just had to receive the one that would hold her back.

She followed her mentor out into the forest and she kept her head down as she sulked. "Alright, Hopepaw," Thornclaw mewed. "I'm going to teach you how to hunt mice. A mouse will feel your pawsteps, so you need to carry yourself very light on your paws. Got it?"

Hopepaw nodded and mimicked Thornclaw's stance. She kept her paws light and looked forward eagerly. "There you go," Thornclaw nodded. "Keep your hind end down, you look like a duck."

She fixed her position and then stood up to look at Thornclaw. "Can I hunt now? Please?"

Thornclaw sighed and shook out his golden-brown coat. "Very well. Let's go to Sunningrocks, there's bound to be a couple of mice there."

The pair traveled through the forest towards Sunningrocks. Hopepaw kept her eyes and ears open for any trace of prey. She sniffed the air and noticed something in the undergrowth. Thornclaw kept moving, but Hopepaw stopped. Was it a squirrel? Or maybe it was a rabbit?

She dropped down into her hunting crouch and stalked forward on silent paws. Her body was a quick learner and she adjusted herself as she moved forward. The creature twitched and she caught a glance of brown fur. Hopepaw's heart was racing but she tried to keep it quiet.

Once she was close enough, Hopepaw gathered her hind legs beneath her. Her ears swiveled towards her prey. Its scent told her that it was a squirrel, and she could see its bushy tail. Without warning, Hopepaw launched herself over the grass and landed squarely on top of the squirrel. It squirmed underneath her paws and she quickly killed it with a bite to its neck.

Hopepaw held up her prize and her green eyes were bright with

pride. Thornclaw had returned once he realized she wasn't following him. He came just in time to watch her make the kill. "That was great, Hopepaw. You're a natural hunter!"

She couldn't stop the pride that filled her chest. It felt like she would explode. "Can I learn how to fight now?"

Thornclaw shook his head. "Not yet. Bury the squirrel and follow me. We are going to pay a visit to the RiverClan border."

Hopepaw's ears pricked at the mention of RiverClan. She hasn't seen all the borders yet, that included the RiverClan border. After a while of walking, Hopepaw could see the river through the trees. Her tail waved in excitement and she raced out of the shadows and relished in the open sun on her red fur. Thornclaw followed her a little bit more cautiously.

She noticed the Sunningrocks just past the trees and only a few fox-lengths from the river. Hopepaw dashed towards the Sunningrocks and leaped onto them. She felt giddy as a kit. The river was magnificent! From on top of the rocks she could see it stretch both directions for what felt like forever. Then it curved around the bend and disappeared.

Hopepaw saw what must've been the Stepping Stones. She'd heard the warriors speak of them and that they allowed a cat to cross the river without getting a paw wet. Her ears pricked and she jumped down from the Sunningrocks. She wanted to get a closer look at the Stepping Stones.

When she reached the bank, her eyes widened. How could any cat leap that far without slipping or falling in? Hopepaw heard Thornclaw calling her from the forest, but her curiosity won her over. She tucked her hind legs underneath her and sprang from the bank to the first stone.

"Hopepaw!" Thornclaw growled as he appeared out of no where. He stopped at the bank and she could see in his golden eyes that he was furious. "Get back here!"

"It's fine, Thornclaw." Hopepaw mewed after she steadied herself.

"I'm only going halfway and then I'll come back." She promised him.

Adrenaline surged through her blood as she leaped to the next stone, and then the next. Pride filled her chest and she couldn't believe she was actually doing this! Then, as she prepared to leap to the next rock, her hind legs slipped. Her take off was short and Hopepaw flailed into the next stone. She hit her head and her body went limp.

She blacked out for only a few seconds, but she was aware of her body sinking. The water dragged her down and she could feel the strong current pushing her under. Hopepaw tried to swim, tried to claw her way to the surface, but she lacked experience and strength. Her lungs ached as they screamed for air.

Blackness started to cloud her vision and she felt her body growing heavy. Images swirled at the edge of her vision. Were they StarClan cats that had come to rescue her? Did StarClan really exist despite what Tigerstar said? She found herself crying out to StarClan as fear clouded her mind and heart. Hopepaw felt reality slipping away.

Then suddenly, she felt someone grab her scruff. She was being pulled to the surface. Was it Thornclaw? She didn't know that he could swim. As her head broke the surface, she gulped in air. Whoever rescued her still held her tightly as they carried her to the TigerClan bank.

When her paws finally reached the bank, she dug in her claws and pulled herself out of the water. She collapsed on the bank and coughed out water. Thornclaw was soon at her side and his eyes were filled with worry. Wasn't he the one who rescued her?!

"Hopepaw, are you alright?!" Thornclaw meowed worriedly.

Slowly, she pushed herself up into a sitting position. That's the first time she looked upon her rescuer. The tom reeked of RiverClan scent and she watched him shake water droplets from his thick, gray pelt. Down his spine was a dark dorsal stripe much like her own. His eyes were yellow and they were surprisingly filled with worry for her.

"Is this Sandstorm's daughter?" The tom asked Thornclaw.

Thornclaw nodded. "Yes, her name is Hopepaw. She was named an apprentice only a few days ago." While Hopepaw was still coughing up water, she heard Thornclaw thank the tom. "Thank you, Graystripe. I don't know what I'd done if you hadn't rescued her."

This was *Graystripe*? The infamous traitor that she was warned about since kithood? The one that left the clan to be with his half-clan kits in RiverClan?! Why would he rescue her if the clan hated him so much? How could Thornclaw talk to him with such respect, such reverence?!

Thornclaw padded back over to her. "Come on, Hopepaw. Let's get you to Cinderpelt." He nosed her to her paws and allowed her to lean on him.

As they walked back into the woods, she glanced over her shoulder at Graystripe. The tom met her gaze and then turned away. She watched him slip back into the river and swim back to RiverClan territory. How could a former TigerClan cat learn to swim? She knew that she would spend the rest of her life avoiding water where she couldn't see the bottom.

How could a cat that had been described to her as a selfish traitor have saved her and proved everything she's been told wrong? It didn't make any sense, and honestly, she was too tired to ponder it.

Chapter 6

[image]

After the accident, Hopepaw was forced to spend a few days resting in Cinderpelt's den. She told the entire clan who had rescued her and it had caused uneasiness. Hopepaw sometimes felt Tigerstar's gaze burn into her when she wasn't looking. How could the clan blame her for who happened to save her?

Today, Cinderpelt examined her to see if she was fit to return to training. She squirmed under Cinderpelt's careful eye. "Am I okay? I want to return to training!"

The dark gray she-cat purred in amusement. "You'll be fine. Just stay away from the river!"

Hopepaw bounced with excitement. "Thank you, Cinderpelt!" She turned and raced out of the healer den only to narrowly avoid colliding with Tigerstar. "Oh! Tigerstar, I'm sorry, I didn't see you."

The large dark brown tabby tom purred but somehow it felt menacing. "I forgive you, Hopepaw. Actually, I was here to talk with you."

"Me?" Hopepaw's green eyes filled with confusion.

Tigerstar nodded, "Come, let's speak privately in my den." He turned and Hopepaw had no choice but to follow him.

They disappeared behind the lichen curtain that led to the leader's den. Tigerstar sat down in front of his nest and curled his tail over his front paws. Hopepaw sat in front of him and tried not to show how nervous she was. What could Tigerstar possibly want from her?

"Hopepaw, when you fell into the river and Graystripe saved you, what were his mannerisms?" Tigerstar's amber eyes bore into her. It still unnerved her how similar he resembled his son, Bramblepaw.

She didn't understand the question. How was she supposed to notice his mannerisms when she had been recovering from near death? "Uh, he didn't seem threatening. He seemed genuinely concerned about my well-being."

"Oh?" Tigerstar leaned forward. "And why might that be?"

Hopepaw stared down at her paws. "He was probably just concerned because he couldn't watch an innocent cat die?"

"Wrong!" Tigerstar dug his long, wicked claws into the dirt. "Hopepaw, he's a heartless traitor. He was best friends with *Fireheart*, who, may I remind you, killed Bluestar." Tigerstar shook his head. "He doesn't care about a cat from another clan, that is, unless there is a special connection?"

"Connection?" Hopepaw mewed, dumbfounded. "What kind if connection?"

Tigerstar shrugged, "I don't know. You tell me." He eyed her as if he expected her to reveal something she held back. Too bad she had to disappoint him.

Hopepaw shook her head. "I've never met Graystripe in my life. He means nothing to me."

"Good." Tigerstar's amber eyes glowed. "That is all, you may go now."

After giving a nod of respect, Hopepaw backed out of the den. She turned and walked away with a feeling of foreshadowing in her belly. What was that about? Surely Tigerstar must have a reason for asking her those questions. Was there something going on that she didn't know about?

Hopepaw padded towards the apprentice den where she found the others laying around sunning. Bramblepaw was sparring with Ashpaw, Tawnypaw talked with Sorrelpaw and Fernpaw, and Owlpaw, Sootpaw, and Rainpaw all laid in the sun. Owlpaw was the first to notice her approaching.

"What were you doing in Tigerstar's den?" Owlpaw asked her as he

sat up abruptly.

Hopepaw sat down in between Owlpaw and Tawnypaw. "He just wanted to ask me a few questions." She gave a little shake as if she could shake away their questioning stares.

"About Graystripe?" Bramblepaw wondered, pausing from his spar to join the conversation.

Rainpaw's eyes suddenly lit up. "Yeah, wasn't he the one that saved you from drowning?" All the others leaned in with their ears pricked in curiosity.

Their eyes bore into her and she felt overwhelmed. "Yes, it was Graystripe." Hopepaw averted her eyes. Why did everyone care so much about Graystripe?

"What happened?" Sorrelpaw squeaked with curiosity.

"Yeah, Hopepaw!" Sootpaw joined in, amber eyes wide. "What happened?"

Hopepaw surveyed the group and sensed their desire for a scary story that would haunt their dreams. But it hadn't been like that at all, at least not the part that involved Graystripe. She took a deep breath and prepared to tell the story.

"I was exploring with Thornclaw," Hopepaw began. "The day was sunny and a warm breeze blew through the trees. I raced along the river bank until I came to the Stepping Stones. They called to me, begging for me to explore. I leaped to the first stone and then the next."

"Suddenly, my leg slipped and I fell into the raging waters below. The water dragged me down like a cat taking a bird out of the sky. I couldn't breathe and darkness surrounded me. I felt like I was going to die. Then, I felt teeth in my scruff, pulling me to safety. Only once I got out of the water did I realize my rescuer wasn't TigerClan."

"I was face to face with a gigantic RiverClan tom. He reeked of fish and his powerful muscles rippled underneath his dark gray pelt. A

dorsal stripe started at his forehead and trailed all the way down his spine like a snake. His yellow eyes bore into me and I couldn't take my eyes off of his long claws."

"Did he attack you?" Sorrelpaw gasped.

Hopepaw shook her head. "No. He just stared at me. Then Thornclaw and I left him behind. I glanced back at him once and I saw him slip back into the river, swimming like a fish."

"Wow," Ashpaw shivered. "I can't believe you stared down a traitor and lived!"

They kept asking her questions about the "evil" traitor, and she wished she hadn't made him sound so horrendous. Graystripe hadn't meant her no harm, so why was his name despised so badly? He did break the Warrior Code, but so did every cat now and then.

Suddenly, Tigerstar yowled from Highrock, calling the clan to him. All warriors, queens, and apprentices gathered to hear what their leader had to say. Hopepaw ended up in between Bramblepaw and Sorrelpaw. She looked up at the magnificent tabby tom and awaited for his words.

"Today, we name a new apprentice." Tigerstar growled. "Maplekit, come forward."

Hopepaw watched excitedly as her sister ran forward to stand in front of Tigerstar. She realized just how tiny her littermate was, especially standing next to the leader. Who would be Maplekit's mentor?

"Maplekit, you have been chosen to follow the path of a healer. Cinderpelt has agreed to take you on as her apprentice. Do you accept this position?" Tigerstar's amber eyes were focused on Maplekit and Hopepaw saw something sinister in them.

Maplekit slowly nodded, her little voice squeaked her answer: "I accept."

Tigerstar nodded, "Then, Maplekit, until you master the art of healing, you will be known as Maplepaw."

The clan cheered Maplepaw's name and Hopepaw watched her sister greet Cinderpelt. Hopepaw dug her claws into the dirt. How humiliating! Tigerstar has made it very clear how he views healers, so for him to cast Maplepaw aside as a healer was heartbreaking. Hopepaw felt angry, angry that she would never run the forests with her sister nor fight by her side.

Hopepaw stood up and walked away from the clan, her tail lashing in anger. She approached the apprentice den although she wasn't in the mood to sit around. Her blood boiled and her heart called her to race through the trees.

Suddenly, she felt someone brush against her side. She nearly jumped before realizing it was only Bramblepaw. "You startled me!" Hopepaw gasped.

Bramblepaw lowered his head. "Sorry." Then he leaned over to whisper in her ear. "Tonight, while everyone is asleep, I want to show you something that I found."

"What is it?" Hopepaw asked quietly.

Bramblepaw purred in amusement. "I can't tell you, otherwise it's not a surprise!"

Hopepaw smiled, "Okay, fine. I'll come."

Chapter 7

[image]

That night, Hopepaw and Bramblepaw waited restlessly in their nests for everyone to fall asleep. Hopepaw listened to the breathig of her denmates to see if they were sleeping. She could hear Bramblepaw rustling in his nest, obviously anxious to get going.

It seemed like a lifetime had passed before all their denmates were asleep. Hopepaw sat up in her nest and so did Bramblepaw. "Are the warriors asleep?" She whispered to Bramblepaw.

"Let me check," Bramblepaw hushed. He crept out of the apprentice den and surveyed the camp. When he stuck his head back in, he nodded to Hopepaw. "Everyone's asleep."

"Let's go, then." Hopepaw murmured. She followed Bramblepaw silently across the clearing and out the camp entrance. The cool night air brushed against Hopepaw's fur. She loved the smell of the wind.

"Alright, where to?" Hopepaw asked Bramblepaw.

"Follow me." Bramblepaw led the way through the forest.

The way they were heading made it seem like they were going to Sandy Hollow. But Bramblepaw led Hopepaw straight past Sandy Hollow. She recognized the smell of the river and RiverClan's scent. Were they going to RiverClan? Bramblepaw continued onward until Hopepaw could see the river.

"Why are we going this way?" Hopepaw asked nervously. She didn't want to be anywhere near the river!

"You'll see," Bramblepaw whispered. "We're almost there!" They followed the river bank upstream and then turned out away from it. Hopepaw's paws were getting tired and she just wanted to return to her nest and sleep!

That's when she saw it: Fourtrees. The four great oaks stood taller against the other trees and their branches reached for the stars. Hopepaw stared in amazement at it. How could Bramblepaw even know how to get here?

"Wow," Hopepaw mused. "It's beautiful!"

"That's not even the best part. Come on!" Bramblepaw raced to Fourtrees and Hopepaw dashed after him.

The two apprentices entered into Fourtrees and stared in wonder at it. Hopepaw had never seen a tree so tall! And at the center of it all was a gigantic boulder where Hopepaw guessed the clan leaders stood. That's when Hopepaw noticed Bramblepaw climbing one of the oaks.

"Bramblepaw!" Hopepaw gasped. "What are you doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing? I'm climbing. Come on, Hopepaw. It's amazing up here!" Bramblepaw waved at her with his tail.

Growling slightly, Hopepaw placed her forepaws on the trunk of the tree. She dug her claws into the rough bark and started climbing. It wasn't long until she reached the branch where Bramblepaw waited. Three strong branches gnarled together here to form a platform for them to sit. They were so close to the stars, Hopepaw felt that she could reach out and touch them.

She glanced at Bramblepaw only to find him already looking at her. Quickly, she looked away, embarrassed to have been caught staring. Bramblepaw purred in amusement. Then he looked back at the night sky.

"My father took me here after I was named an apprentice." Bramblepaw started. "He told me that once I was old enough that he would make me his deputy." Bramblepaw glanced at Hopepaw. "He said that TigerClan will grow so powerful that the other clans will quake in fear of our names. We are going to try to unify the clans."

"What?!" Hopepaw sputtered in disbelief. "But that's against the

Warrior Code!"

Bramblepaw shook his head. "Tigerstar says that the clans will be stronger joined together. Don't you want TigerClan to be as strong as it can be?" His questioning stare burned into her like a flame.

Hopepaw nodded eagerly. "Of course I do! I just don't think that combining the clans will do that. What will happen to the other clan leaders?"

Bramblepaw shrugged. "Either they step down, or they're killed. A strong clan can't be divided."

Hopepaw lowered her head. Her mind was swirling with questions. "And how does your father plan on getting the other clans to submit?"

"Tigerstar says that all we need to do is conquer one clan. If we have two clans in one we are already stronger than the other clans. Either they join peacefully or we take them over by force." Bramblepaw turned to face Hopepaw and his amber eyes were filled with excitement. "When I become leader, everything will fall to me. And...well, I was hoping that you might want to be my deputy?"

Hopepaw could only stare at Bramblepaw. She knew, deep down, that Tigerstar was power-hungry and that Bramblepaw was ambitious. But couldn't that be a good thing? And she couldn't deny the warm feeling in her heart whenever Bramblepaw looked at her. Where had these feelings come from?

"Don't make promises you can't keep." Hopepaw mewed softly, her green eyes turned downward.

Bramblepaw lifted her head with his tail. "No, I promise Hopepaw. You'll be my deputy. There isn't any other cat I'd want to rule TigerClan by my side." His amber eyes met hers and she saw fierce determination there in the gold of his irises. "I promise."

~

A/N

This is kind of a short chapter but it's meaningful. In case anyone hasn't caught on, Hopepaw is kind of the alternate version of Squirrelpaw. They even look similar, although there are key differences. Anyways, please vote, comment, and add this story to your reading list!

Chapter 8

[image]

Hopepaw woke the next morning to Tigerstar yowling for a clan meeting. Groaning, Hopepaw rolled over onto her other side only to find herself face to face with Bramblepaw. She sat up quickly just before he opened his eyes. The dark brown tabby apprentice stretched his front paws and yawned.

"Is Tigerstar calling a clan meeting?" Bramblepaw wondered. All the other apprentices were already out there.

Hopepaw nodded, "Yes, but I don't know what about." Her fur felt hot with embarrassment as she remembered last night. Bramblepaw and her had laid there under the stars for what felt like a lifetime. They had returned to camp just after moonhigh. Hopepaw felt extremely deprived of sleep, but it had been well worth it.

She exited the den with Bramblepaw right behind her. They joined the other apprentices and she noticed Sorrelpaw and Tawnypaw give her a look. Hopepaw tried to ignored them and focused on the meeting.

"TigerClan, today it is my pleasure to announce that Fernpaw and Ashpaw have reached their warrior assessments." Tigerstar announced and the clan erupted into cheering. Tigerstar silenced them with a flick of the tail. "When TigerClan was weaker and known by the name of ThunderClan, our apprentices proved themselves through a monitored hunt and battle by their mentors. But now, in this new era of strength, we will assess our apprentices a bit differently."

Tigerstar jumped down from Highrock and walked to the center of the crowd. "Make space for our two apprentices." The clan moved back until there was a considerable amount of space at the center of the clan. Hopepaw's belly twisted at the realization of what they had formed: a fighting ring.

"Each apprentice will face off with a seasoned warrior. If they prove themselves formidable in battle, then they will receive their warrior names." Tigerstar growled. "Ashpaw, you will go first. You will fight Darkstripe. Claws unsheathed." Murmurs of disbelief and anger rose up from the clan, but no one dared confront Tigerstar-the death of Smallear still fresh in their memories.

Ashpaw made his way to the center of the ring where Darkstripe waited. Hopepaw sized up each fighter. Darkstripe was a big tom, not as big as Tigerstar, but still big. His long claws looked frightening from where Hopepaw sat. She glanced at Ashpaw. Although the pale gray tom has proven himself, he still would need everything he had to beat Darkstripe.

"And...begin!" Tigerstar yowled.

Darkstripe lunged for Ashpaw and the pale gray apprentice narrowly avoided him. He spun around and lashed Darkstripe across his haunches. Then, Ashpaw leaped on top of Darkstripe only for the great dark tabby tom to fall back on top of him. Hopepaw winced at the sight.

When Darkstripe stood up, he turned to claw Ashpaw against his belly. Hopepaw noticed Brindleface, Ashpaw's mother, watching with a horrified expression. Ashpaw suddenly lunged for Darkstripe, securing his front legs around Darkstripe's neck while his hind claws raked down Darkstripe's belly.

Blood spilled onto the ground and Ashpaw let go of Darkstripe. The dark tom had fire in his dark eyes, and he launched himself at Ashpaw. Hopepaw sighed in relief when Ashpaw dodged him. Just before they could go at each other again, Tigerstar called them off.

"Ashpaw," Tigerstar walked into the ring towards the pale gray apprentice. "You have proved yourself a formidable fighter. Do you promise to uphold the Code of TigerClan, to fight until the death to protect this clan, and to draw blood like a warrior?"

Ashpaw dipped his head in respect. "I do."

Tigerstar stepped forward and raked his claws across the right side

of Ashpaw's face. Blood dripped from Tigerstar's deadly claws. "Then I name you Ashfang, warrior of TigerClan."

The clan, still mortified by the display they had watched, was hardly able to cheer Ashfang's name. It took them a few moments to regain their minds, and then they cheered for the newly named Ashfang.

Tigerstar then turned to Fernpaw. "Fernpaw, you will be fighting Swiftwind."

Hopepaw watched her friend enter the ring. Fernpaw looked scared and determined at the same time. Her attention turned to Swiftwind. The black and white tom had been an apprentice of Longtail's and he had adopted the same arrogance that Longtail and Darkstripe possessed. Hopepaw worried that he would be too hard on Fernpaw.

"Begin!" Tigerstar yowled.

Fernpaw was the first to lunge. She clawed Swiftwind across the face and the warrior angrily retaliated with a few well-placed blows. The fight didn't last as long as Ashfang's, but Fernpaw definitely had been able to hold her own. When Tigerstar stopped them, Fernpaw had a few gashes, so did Swiftwind.

"Fernpaw, you have proved yourself a formidable fighter." Tigerstar went to stand in front of Fernpaw. "Do you promise to uphold the Code of TigerClan, to fight until the death to protect this clan, and to draw blood like a warrior?"

Fernpaw lowered her head and replied: "I do."

Tigerstar raked his claws on the right side of Fernpaw's face, just like he had done with Ashfang. "Then I name you Ferncloud, warrior of TigerClan."

"Ferncloud! Ferncloud!" The clan cheered. Hopepaw couldn't bring herself to cheer. What was happening to the clan? They seemed to be growing accustomed to Tigerstar's sadistic ways. Hopepaw noticed Sandstorm didn't join in with the cheering, neither did

Cinderpelt nor Whitestorm.

But Hopepaw wanted to fit in. She wanted to be accepted by her clanmates, especially Bramblepaw. So she joined in with the cheering. Besides, Tigerstar was trying to make them stronger.

Tigerstar suddenly silenced the clan, leaping back onto Highrock. "Tonight, TigerClan will attack ShadowClan. It is time that two clans became one. TigerClan is the strongest clan, and I see it as our destiny to unify the clans. The forest will shake underneath our power and pride. Nothing can break us. We are TigerClan!"

"TigerClan! TigerClan! TigerClan!"

Again, Tigerstar silenced the clan. "Tonight, I will bring with me all of my warriors except for Halftail, Patchpelt, One-eye, and Dappletail. I will also bring every apprentice."

The clan erupted into cheering. Tonight, TigerClan would make its move to rule top he forest. Hopepaw only hoped the future would be as magnificent as Bramblepaw had promised.

~

A/N
Some of the warriors will not have the same names as I don't believe Tigerstar would've chosen the exact same names as Bluestar. For example, Ashfur is Ashfang. Please vote and comment!

Chapter 9

[image]

The sun set and the clan was anxious to get going. Tigerstar spoke with his warriors while Hopepaw sat with Bramblepaw, Tawnypaw, and Owlpaw. Darkness was taking hold over the forest and a shiver crawled down Hopepaw's spine. A sense of foreshadowing overwhelmed Hopepaw.

Suddenly, the world around her faded. When she opened her eyes, she realized that she stood at Fourtrees just like that night with Bramblepaw. Voices whispered to her but she couldn't see any other cat. "Who's there?" Hopepaw wondered with a shaky voice.

Shadows slunk along the edge of the clearing. Their glowing eyes pierced through the darkness. Fear took over Hopepaw's heart but, when she tried to run, she found that she couldn't move her paws. Was this real? It felt real.

"Hopepaw... Hopepaw..." The voices whispered through Fourtrees.

"W-what do you want?" Hopepaw demanded, spinning around in an attempt to find the voices.

"Look..." The voices ordered.

Suddenly, the trees around her disappeared and she could see the lay of the land. There was TigerClan's camp! And the river! Oh, there was the Thunderpath, and past that was ShadowClan's territory. The forest looked green and lush, bursting with life.

Then, something changed. Darkness ate away at the light in TigerClan's camp. Hopepaw watched the darkness spread throughout TigerClan's territory and it devoured every bit of good in its path. The forest turned dark.

Hopepaw watched the darkness envelope ShadowClan and then it moved on to RiverClan. Finally, the darkness devoured WindClan.

All four of the clans were completely covered in darkness. What could it mean?

"Save them..." A voice whispered in her ear. Hopepaw spun around and came face to face with a fiery orange tabby tom.

"Who are you?" Hopepaw demanded. The tom simply blinked his green eyes and turned away. As he started to walk away, Hopepaw could feel the vision starting to fade. "Wait! Come back! Tell me who you are!" But it was too late, the vision evaporated from her mind.

"Hopepaw? Hopepaw, are you paying attention?" Owlpaw poked at his sister with a claw. She nodded her head to feign interest. "Good, I thought you'd fallen asleep for a moment. Come on, we're leaving."

Hopepaw followed her brother over to where the clan was gathering. She came to stand beside Bramblepaw. Tigerstar stood at the head of the clan with Darkstripe and Longtail at his flanks.

"Today," Tigerstar's voice boomed all the way across the clearing. "Today is the day that TigerClan makes history!"

The clan yowled in excitement and it felt as if the ground were shaking. Hopepaw couldn't get the image out of her mind of the orange tabby tom. What had the darkness meant? Did it represent Tigerstar? Was he the darkness that would devour the forest?

Suddenly, Tigerstar spun around and led the clan out of camp. They moved through the forest like a tidal wave, strong and unstoppable. It wasn't long until Hopepaw could hear the Thunderpath. The clan came to a halt.

"We'll cross in groups." Tigerstar announced. "The first wave with me will be Longtail, Brackenfur, Dustpelt, Sandstorm, Thornclaw, Bramblepaw, and Hopepaw. The second group will be Darkstripe, Whitestorm, Mousefur, Runningwind, Ashfang, Tawnypaw, and Owlpaw. And everyone else will cross with Swiftwind."

Tigerstar pricked his ears, and when the Thunderpath was clear, he

lunged forward. Hopepaw stayed glued in between Thornclaw and Bramblepaw. Her paws hurt from the hard Thunderpath. How could it feel so hot and dirty? It smelled horrific. Finally, they reached the other side and Hopepaw allowed her heart to calm down.

The second group and the third group both crossed successfully. Tigerstar led the clan further into ShadowClan's territory. Hopepaw flinched at every little sound but she tried not to. Her heart raced with fear and anticipation. This was her first battle!

After what seemed like a moon, Hopepaw could finally see what appeared to be the ShadowClan camp. Tigerstar stopped the clan and turned to them to give a battle strategy.

"There will be two waves." Tigerstar growled and his amber eyes glinted in the moonlight. "The first will enter into the camp and directly attack the sleeping warriors. At the same time, the second group will divide and conquer the medicine cat den, apprentice den, and the nursery. Don't worry about the elders unless they attack you."

"The first group will be with me. You are Longtail, Runnningwind, Mousefur, Sandstorm, Brightflower, Ashfang, Brackenfur, Sorrelpaw, Rainpaw, Bramblepaw, Tawnypaw, and Hopepaw. The second group is with Darkstripe. You are Whitestorm, Goldenflower, Dustpelt, Willowpelt, Brindleface, Thornclaw, Ferncloud, Sootpaw, and Owlpaw." Tigerstar eyed every single cat. "Let's make history."

Tigerstar spun around and dashed into the ShadowClan camp. Hopepaw stayed somewhat close to Sandstorm, but far enough away that she didn't seem weak. She saw her mother give her a reassuring smile and it surprisingly helped calm her nerves. This was the calm before the storm.

Suddenly, screeching filled the air. The warriors that had been sleeping were now waking up. Hopepaw braced herself to fight. The clearing suddenly became a mess of screeching, clawing, biting cats. A huge tabby tom fell on Hopepaw with all of his weight.

Hopepaw spit in anger and clawed at his stomach with her claws

unsheathed. She felt proud to see the drops of blood. It left a thrill deep inside her chest. The tom swung at her, but she dodged him and lunged at his neck. Her jaws locked around his neck, not enough to kill him. He struggled to detangle her and she raked her hind legs down his chest.

She released herself from him and lunged at a ginger she-cat with white flecks. The she-cat swung at her with claws outstretched and caught her along the face. Hopepaw fell back and was soon pinned beneath the powerful she-cat. She struggled to free herself, but it was no use.

Suddenly, a flash of pale ginger rammed into the enemy warrior, knocking her free of her attacker. Hopepaw scrambled to her paws to see Sandstorm locked in combat with the warrior. She turned away and looked for a new opponent. Blood stained the clearing and many cats had already fallen in battle.

Then, a new attacker collided with her. Hopepaw reeled back and hissed in the face of a dark brown tabby tom. "Where's my brother, fox-heart?!"

"Oh, do you mean Rowanpaw?" Hopepaw tried to imitate the same sadistic look that came over Tigerstar sometimes. "It was quite entertaining to watch Tigerstar rip him limb from limb."

Snarling, the apprentice lunged for Hopepaw's throat. She dived underneath him and propelled him with her back legs into Dustpelt. The dusty brown warrior soon had the ShadowClan apprentice screaming for mercy.

Hopepaw attacked a small brown tom and she clawed him across the face. The tom knocked her off of her paws and clawed at her stomach. She screamed in pain and kicked him away. Then she immediately lashed at him with her claws outstretched. She felt satisfaction when she tore into his shoulder. He collapsed from pain and she moved on.

TigerClan was slowly taking dominance. Hopepaw was breathing heavily from the fight. Her sharp green eyes easily found Tigerstar battling with a dark ginger she-cat. From behind Tigerstar,

Hopepaw noticed a huge white tom with jet black paws sneaking up from behind.

"No!" Hopepaw screeched and she soared over Tigerstar and landed squarely on top of the tom whom she assumed was Blackstar. The ShadowClan leader reared back and she jumped out of the way before he toppled over.

Hopepaw swiftly pounced on him. Despite all her training, her strength just simply couldn't match the seasoned warrior. Blackstar easily threw her off and she flew into a tree trunk with a thud. Tigerstar turned on Blackstar with rage in his eyes. The two leaders battled for dominance as Hopepaw struggled to stay awake.

Sandstorm was immediately at her daughter's side. She looked on as Tigerstar pinned Blackstar and clawed his throat. It was over.

Chapter 10

[image]

Hopepaw slowly lifted herself off the ground. Tigerstar stood over Blackstar's bleeding body and all the cats of ShadowClan stopped fighting. TigerClan warriors surrounded them with their eyes glowing menacingly. They looked so fear-filled it was comical. The once proud ShadowClan overtaken so quickly.

Tigerstar was covered nose to tail in blood, and Hopepaw knew it was ShadowClan blood. Her leader's amber eyes glowed as the moonlight reflected from them. His long, sharp claws held Blackstar beneath him.

Hopepaw surveyed the camp. No kits, queens, or elders were harmed. It appeared only one cat was killed, a tom named Boulder. Every cat was covered in blood, their own and that of their enemies. The cats of TigerClan relished in the taste of victory. History indeed was made.

Sandstorm helped Hopepaw to her paws. Hopepaw leaned against her mother and they joined the TigerClan warriors. Owlpaw came over to them and sat down beside his sister. He bore a couple cuts that would leave scars-something Owlpaw surely desired. Hopepaw made eye contact with Bramblepaw from across the clearing. Victory was theirs, and Hopepaw considered the future Bramblepaw promised her. It didn't feel so far away.

"Cats of TigerClan, cats of ShadowClan..." Tigerstar's voice echoed across the clearing. His eyes glinted. "Tonight, a new future awaits us. TigerClan is the strongest clan to ever exist, we have proven that here." Tigerstar dug his claws into Blackstar's blood-stained pelt. "I offer a better future for the cats of ShadowClan and a life of misery to those who defy me."

"Cats of ShadowClan, I am giving you a proposition: join TigerClan or die." Tigerstar roared.

The cats of ShadowClan were silent. Then, very slowly, a few warriors dipped their heads to Tigerstar. It set off a reaction and soon all the warriors bowed their heads. Eventually the apprentices, elders, queens, and kits. The whole of ShadowClan gave up so easily.

Hopepaw was appalled by their softness. To think that a whole clan would turn belly up just because another clan leader told them to. It disgusted Hopepaw. She had always been told that ShadowClan was formidable and bold.

"Excellent." Tigerstar addressed both clans as a whole. "There is no more ShadowClan, just as there is no more ThunderClan. All that remains is TigerClan. Let our voices shake the forest, let our enemies quake in fear. We are one clan. The other two clans don't stand a chance, and soon, all four clans will be unified."

"There will be no more fighting over scraps of prey, no more fear. TigerClan will rule the entire forest." Tigerstar lifted his head higher. He almost resembled a tiger, which was very fitting. The darkness of night would give away to a new era, one where TigerClan prevailed.

"Darkstripe," Tigerstar turned to his deputy. "I'll be staying here to polish these cats to join TigerClan. I want Longtail, Whitestorm, Mousefur, Sandstorm, Dustpelt, and Swiftwind to stay. Take everyone else back to the camp. There are matters that need to be discussed."

Darkstripe dipped his head. Hopepaw turned to Sandstorm and wished her mother didn't have to stay. The pale ginger she-cat nuzzled her daughter. "I'll be home soon. Take care of your littermates." Then Sandstorm padded over to join Tigerstar and the others.

Hopepaw had no choice but to follow Darkstripe home with the majority of the warriors and apprentices that came. She found herself walking beside Bramblepaw and Rainpaw. Their eyes were shining with triumph.

It was sunrise by the time the battle party returned, save for the few

that stayed behind at the ShadowClan camp. Those that had remained emerged from their dens and their eyes widened at the bloodied warriors. Hopepaw felt proud to have been part of such a historic battle.

Darkstripe gathered the clan beneath Highrock to give the news. "ShadowClan territory is under our command." The clan yowled in excitement. "Tigerstar, along with a few warriors, have stayed behind to demand order." Darkstripe's lips curled back to reveal his fangs. "TigerClan is victorious!" The camp was deafened by the uproar.

All Hopepaw wanted to do was sleep. Her paws were heavy and her eyes were droopy. Every part of her body stung from her battle wounds. She felt a light touch at her shoulder and met the sweet eyes of Maplepaw.

"Where's Sandstorm?" Maplepaw asked worriedly.

"Don't worry," Hopepaw soothed her sister, licking her atop her head. "She stayed behind with Tigerstar."

Maplepaw sighed with relief. "Let me look at your wounds."

Hopepaw nodded and stayed still. Her sister soaked up the blood with wet moss and the cool water felt heavenly on her stinging wounds. She felt proud to have battle wounds at such an early age. Hopefully, she would have many more battles.

Bramblepaw approached her and Hopepaw's heart fluttered a little. He met her gaze softly. "I saw you attack Blackstar. That was very brave."

Hopepaw purred as she met Bramblepaw's eyes. "It's what any loyal TigerClan cat would've done."

Bramblepaw leaned forward and brushed his cheek against hers. Hopepaw was frozen and she felt her pelt turn hot with embarrassment. She purred and looked deep into Bramblepaw's eyes. Her dark vision gone from her mind. How could something bad happen now? TigerClan won and Bramblepaw had noticed her.

What more could she ask for?

"Okay, you're good." Maplepaw broke the silence. "Go get some rest, and no training tomorrow!"

"Thanks Maplepaw." Hopepaw mewed as her eyes never strayed from Bramblepaw's. She blinked and looked away. "I'm going to go get some rest."

"Goodnight, Hopepaw." Bramblepaw murmured.

She purred, "Goodnight Bramblepaw." Hopepaw turned and disappeared into the apprentice den. She curled up in her nest and sleep quickly took her.

~

A/N
I hope you guys are enjoying the book as much as I enjoy writing it! I have big plans for this book and I'm so excited! Please vote and comment!

Allegiances Updated

[image]

Key
[T] Previously ThunderClan
[S] Previously ShadowClan

TigerClan
Leader-Tigerstar: large, dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes and unusually sharp claws [T]
Deputy-Darkstripe: dark tabby tom with black stripes [T]
Advisors-
-Whitestorm: big white tom [T]
-Blackfoot: white tom with black paws [S]
Healers-
-Cinderpelt: dark gray she-cat [T]
-Runningnose: small gray and white tom [S]
Warriors-
-Frostfur: white she-cat with blue eyes [T]
-Oakfur: small brown tom [S]
-Goldenflower: pale ginger she-cat [T]
-Stumpytail: brown tabby tom [S]
-Tallpoppy: long-legged, light brown tabby she-cat [S]
-Wetfoot: gray tabby tom [S]
-Fawnstep: ginger she-cat with white flecks [S]
-Longtail: pale tabby tom with dark stripes [T]
-Willowpelt: pale gray she-cat with blue eyes [T]
-Jaggedtooth: huge tabby tom [S]
-Dawncloud: small tabby she-cat [S]
-Runningwind: swift tabby tom [T]
-Mousefur: small dusky brown she-cat [T]
-Littlecloud: very small tabby tom [S]
-Russetfur: dark ginger she-cat [S]
-Whitethroat: black tom with white chest and paws [S]
-Brindleface: pretty tabby she-cat [T]
-Brackenfur: golden-brown tabby tom [T]
-Sandstorm: pale ginger she-cat with green eyes [T]

-Dustpelt: dark brown tabby tom [T]
-Darkflower: black she-cat [S]
-Swiftwind: black and white tom [T]
-Brightflower: white she-cat with ginger patches [T]
-Thornclaw: golden-brown tabby tom [T]
-Ferncloud: pale gray she-cat with darker flecks and pale green eyes [T]
-Ashfang: pale gray tom with darker flecks and dark blue eyes [T]
Apprentices-
-Sootpaw: dark gray tom with amber eyes (mentor-Longtail) [T]
-Rainpaw: black tom (mentor-Swiftwind) [T]
-Sorrelpaw: tortoiseshell and white she-cat (mentor-Brackenfur) [T]
-Cedarpaw: dark brown tabby tom (mentor-Russetfur) [S]
-Rowanpaw: ginger tabby tom (mentor-Jaggedtooth) [S]
-Bramblepaw: dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes (mentor-Tigerstar) [T]
-Tawnypaw: tortoiseshell she-cat (mentor-Runningwind) [T]
-Hopepaw: long-haired russet she-cat with a dark dorsal stripe and green eyes (mentor-Thornclaw)
-Owlpaw: light brown tabby tom with green eyes (mentor-Whitestorm)
-Maplepaw: ginger and white she-kit (mentor-Cinderpelt)
Queens-
-Petalnose: tortoiseshell she-cat (mother to Whitethroat's kits: Ravenkit, Cloverkit, and Hollykit) [S]
Kits-
-Ravenkit: black tom (mother-Petalnose) [S]
-Cloverkit: black and white she-kit with green eyes (mother-Petalnose) [S]
-Hollykit: light gray and white tabby she-kit (mother-Petalnose) [S]

RiverClan
Leader-Crookedstar: huge light-colored tabby tom with a twisted jaw
Deputy-Leopardfur: unusually golden spotted she-cat
Medicine Cat-Mudfur: long-haired light brown tabby tom
Warriors-
-Blackclaw: smoky black tom
-Mosspelt: tortoiseshell she-cat
-Stonefur: gray tom with battle-scarred ears

-Mistyfoot: dark gray she-cat
-Loudbelly: dark brown tom
-Heavystep: thickset tabby tom
-Shadepelt: very dark gray she-cat
-Graystripe: long-haired gray tom, formerly of ThunderClan
Apprentices-
-Featherpaw: long-haired silver tabby she-cat with blue eyes (mentor-Mistyfoot)
-Stormpaw: dark gray tom with amber eyes (mentor-Stonefur)
Queens-
-Briarnose: long-haired tortoiseshell she-cat (mother to Stonefur's kits: Dewkit, Shimmerkit, Hailkit, and Turtlekit)
Kits-
-Dewkit: dark gray she-kit with white flecks and amber eyes (mother: Briarnose)
-Hailkit: blue-grey tom with amber eyes (mother: Briarnose)
-Shimmerkit: pale gray she-kit with green eyes (mother: Briarnose)
-Turtlekit: brown tom with golden swirled-stripes (mother: Briarnose)
Elders-
-Graypool: thin gray she-cat with patchy fur and a scarred muzzle

WindClan
Leader-Tallstar: black and white tom with a long tail
Deputy-Deadfoot: black tom with twisted paw
Medicine Cat-Barkface: short-tailed brown tom
Warriors-
-Mudclaw: mottled dark brown tom
-Ashfoot: gray tabby she-cat
-Webfoot: dark gray tabby tom
-Tornear: tabby tom
-Breezetail: cream-colored she-cat with blue eyes
-Onewhisker: light brown tabby tom
-Whitetail: small white she-cat
-Runningbrook: light gray she-cat
Apprentices-
-Gorsepaw: long-legged brown tabby tom (mentor-Breezetail)
-Crowpaw: black tom with blue eyes (mentor-Mudclaw)
-Skypaw: blue-grey she-cat (mentor-Ashfoot)
-Cloudpaw: white tom (mentor-Runningbrook)

Queens-
-Morningflower: tortoiseshell she-cat
-Tawnyfur: golden brown she-cat (mother to Tallstar's kits: Eaglekit & Soarkit)
Kits-
-Eaglekit: dark brown tabby tom with a white-tipped tail & white face (mother: Tawnyfur)
-Soarkit: black and white she-kit with blue eyes (mother: Tawnyfur)
Elders-None

Cats Outside the Clans
-Barley: black and white tom that lives on a farm close to the forest
-Ravenpaw: sleek black cat who lives on the farm with Barley
-Butterfly: golden tabby she-cat
-Free: long-haired gray tom with a dark dorsal stripe and green eyes
-Rosie: tortoiseshell and white she-cat
-Sunny: golden tabby tom
-Maisie: black she-cat with white paws

Chapter 11

[image]

A half-moon passed since ShadowClan became a part of TigerClan. Tigerstar stressed the importance of unity and went so far as to move some former ShadowClan cats into TigerClan's camp while some TigerClan cats went to their camp. The problem of the most importance was keeping order in a clan that was separated.

As far as apprentices go, Sootpaw and Tawnypaw were sent to the North Camp as it was quickly being called. Then Cedarpaw was sent to live here in the South Camp. It didn't take Hopepaw long to recognize Cedarpaw as the apprentice from the battle that claimed to be Rowanpaw's brother. She could hardly sleep at night for fear that he would kill her.

Many warriors were swapped around. Sandstorm, luckily, remained here in the South Camp. Darkstripe was put in charge of the North Camp along with Longtail and Mousefur. Cedarpaw kept the same mentor: Russetfur. The former ShadowClan deputy did not take kindly to being moved to a new camp. She complained about everything and sought out an argument wherever she could find one.

Blackstar returned to the North Camp but had his name changed to Blackfoot. Rumor says that Tigerstar killed Blackfoot as many times as it took to get him down to one life. Hopepaw couldn't imagine dying over and over again. That sounded horrible.

Hopepaw sat outside the apprentice den with Bramblepaw, Owlpaw, and Sorrelpaw. Rainpaw and Cedarpaw were out on patrol. It felt strange to not have Tawnypaw and Sootpaw here, but she understood the importance of mixing the two clans. Plus, from a strategic view, it weakened ShadowClan to be split up so they couldn't fight back.

"Hopepaw!" She heard a voice call. When she looked up, she saw Thornclaw waving her over.

Hopepaw bounded over to her mentor and saw that he was sitting with a few ShadowClan cats as well as Brindleface. She recognized a few of the ShadowClan cats since they were a part of the clan now. One of them was Darkflower, a black she-cat, and then there was Oakfur, a brown tabby tom. The last one was Tallpoppy, a long-legged tabby she-cat.

"We are going on patrol." Thornclaw told her. He stood up and the other warriors did as well. Hopepaw followed the group out of camp and through the forest.

Within the first few days of the Merge, cats from both clans were required to learn the other clan's territory. They were allowed to walk anywhere they wanted between the two territories, and the ShadowClan cats showed them a tunnel that went underneath the Thunderpath. They would never need to cross it again.

"Where are we going?" Hopepaw asked Thornclaw as he led the patrol. Brindleface was at the back of the group talking with Tallpoppy about whatever it is queens talk about. Darkflower whispered with Oakfur.

"We are going to the North Camp." Thornclaw mewed. "And then we are going to Fourtrees."

Hopepaw's ears perked up at the mention of Fourtrees. "Why? Isn't the Gathering tonight?"

Thornclaw nodded, "Yes, but Tigerstar wanted us to check on something."

Hopepaw fell back and ended up walking next to Darkflower. The black she-cat eyed her for a moment before deciding to make conversation. "What's your name again?"

"My name is Hopepaw," She answered the warrior respectfully.

Darkflower's green eyes sparked. "Is your mother Sandstorm?"

"Yes," Hopepaw nodded. "Sandstorm is my mother."

"And who is your father?" Darkflower wondered.

Hopepaw hesitated and pondered how to reply. "Well, I actually don't know who my father is..."

Darkflower blinked in surprise. She turned away and huffed. "What a shame, every cat should know who their father is."

The black she-cat's words hung in the air. Hopepaw couldn't shake them from her head and it stirred something deep within her heart. Was it anger? Regret? Shame? She didn't have much time to ponder it as they now reached the Thunderpath.

Oakfur led the way under the tunnel and Hopepaw followed after Darkflower. She hasn't been through here yet, and it gave her the creeps. From up above, she could hear a monster approaching. The entire tunnel shook as the monster passed overhead. It took all of Hopepaw's courage to not shove past the others towards the light.

Finally, they came up out of the ground and Hopepaw relished in the wind that blew through her thick fur. Oakfur led the patrol across the land and Hopepaw's nose scrunched up at the boggy, wet soil. Was it always like this? These were supposed to be ShadowClan cats, not RiverClan!

"Don't worry, the whole territory isn't like this, only this stretch of land." Darkflower whispered to her.

Darkflower was right, Hopepaw realized. The further they traveled, the drier the land became. All the trees here were tall and thin, and they were more spread apart. The only undergrowth here was grass and a few ferns. She noticed a squirrel race up a tree and her belly rumbled.

The patrol trudged onwards to the North Camp where they would meet up with a few more cats. This mission that they were being sent on sounded important. Thornclaw said that they were only looking at Fourtrees, but what was so important that needed such a large patrol?

Finally, the North Camp came into view. Upon entering, the group was welcomed eagerly by cats from both clans. Hopepaw noticed Darkstripe approaching with Longtail and Blackfoot. Her fur still

crept at the sight of the former clan leader, stripped of his power.

"Thornclaw," Darkstripe nodded to his clanmate. "You bring news from Tigerstar?"

The golden-brown warrior nodded. "He wants us, along with a few from this camp, to go to Fourtrees." Thornclaw's amber eyes surveyed the camp. "He wants us to prepare Fourtrees for the Gathering."

Darkstripe nodded and turned to face their clanmates. Among the crowd, Hopepaw saw Tawnypaw and Sootpaw. "I'll send Fawnstep, Jaggedtooth, and Runningwind with them."

Thronclaw's dipped his head to his deputy. "We'll be on our way then." The group, along with its added members, left the North Camp and headed for Fourtrees.

Hopepaw walked alongside Fawnstep, a ginger she-cat with white flecks. She recognized her from the battle. After Fawnstep gave her a mean look, Hopepaw trotted ahead to fall into step with Brindleface.

The pretty tabby she-cat turned to Hopepaw. "What's wrong? Is someone giving you a hard time?"

Hopepaw shook her head. "No, I'm fine. I just wanted to stretch my legs." She certainly didn't need anyone to think she was weak.

After a lot of walking, Fourtrees came into view. It brought up memories from the night she and Bramblepaw spent gazing at the stars. Despite what he said, she couldn't hold him to his promise, not when there was a whole other clan with potential deputies. Why was she even worrying about this? It would probably be many seasons before Tigerstar died.

Thornclaw led the patrol into Fourtrees. Hopepaw was still amazed by the size of the trees and the expanse of the clearing. She wondered if she would be permitted to attend the next Gathering. It would be interesting to meet cats from RiverClan and WindClan. She wondered how they'd react to the news.

"What are we looking for?" Darkflower asked Thornclaw.

"To say it simply," Thornclaw mewed, "Tigerstar wants to move the camp here so that we won't need to be divided."

"He can't do that!" Fawnstep growled. "This is sacred ground!"

"You can take that up with Tigerstar." Thornclaw bared his fangs. "I'm just the messenger. Let's head back, I have enough information. Fawnstep, Runningwind, and Jaggedtooth, you three can return to the North Camp."

They nodded and ran off in that general direction. Hopepaw watched them leave. Was it such a bad idea to move the camp here? That way, they wouldn't need to live in two different camps. TigerClan would be stronger that way. How could one of her clanmates want anything different?

~

A/N
How are you guys enjoying the book? Do you have any guesses about what may happen? Please let me know in the comments! Also, please vote-it inspires me to update sooner!

Chapter 12

[image]

Tigerstar stood before the entire clan; Darkstripe had brought the North Camp to hear their leader speak. Hopepaw sat beside Bramblepaw and Sorrelpaw with her ears pricked. She knew that Tigerstar would be announcing who went to the Gathering and she desperately wanted to go.

"Tonight is the Gathering." Tigerstar began. The fading sunlight reflected off of his amber eyes and his dark stripes rippled with his powerful muscles. His long claws curved wickedly and glinted in the light. He looked every bit the ferocious leader of a mighty clan.

"This is the night," Tigerstar boomed, "That we show RiverClan and WindClan our strength. They will shake in our presence. Tonight, I am going to ask Crookedstar and Tallstar to surrender."

The clan spoke in hushed whispers, but this didn't come as a surprise to Hopepaw. Bramblepaw had already told her his father's plan to unite the clans. She felt that the clan had expected this, but they probably assumed it was all talk.

"With me, I will bring Whitestorm, Blackfoot, Darkflower, Oakfur, Fawnstep, Longtail, Willowpelt, Runningwind, Jaggedtooth, Brackenfur, Sandstorm, Dustpelt, Swiftwind, Thornclaw, Ashfang, Ferncloud, Bramblepaw, Tawnypaw, Rowanpaw, Hopepaw, Owlpaw, and Sootpaw."

Hopepaw brightened at this. She was going to her first Gathering! Then she felt bad because Sorrelpaw and Rainpaw weren't going. They were both older than her!

She went to stand by the other apprentices. "This is so exciting! Our first Gathering!" She mewed to Owlpaw.

Her brother huffed. "We've been waiting for this day since our first moon."

Hopepaw purred at her brother. Then she noticed that the clan was starting to leave. "Come on, let's go." She raced after the clan and found herself running alongside Bramblepaw. The large dark brown tabby apprentice smiled at her and they kept running.

In the distance, Hopepaw could see Fourtrees with the moon rising behind it. She could see cats walking around in the clearing and wondered if both RiverClan and WindClan were there yet. They were sure in for a surprise.

Tigerstar led the clan down the slope and into Fourtrees. Hopepaw smelled both RiverClan and WindClan scent. She made sure to hold her head high as she followed her clanmates. Their numbers made RiverClan and WindClan look small and invaluable. Hopepaw noticed that the scent of the ShadowClan cats had already started to mix.

Immediately, Tigerstar moved to the Great Rock and jumped up alongside Crookedstar and Tallstar. The two leaders stared in shock at the huge mass of TigerClan cats. Blackfoot was among them, but not as a leader anymore.

"Blackstar?" Crookedstar mewed slowly. "What's happened?"

Blackfoot raised his head high in an attempt to maintain his dignity. "It's Blackfoot now, and I am a warrior of TigerClan."

Tallstar and Crookedstar spun on Tigerstar. "What have you done?" Tallstar cried. "You can't just conquer another clan!"

Tigerstar bared his fangs and snarled. "Well, I've done it. Soon, all four clans will be united under TigerClan."

"Don't you dare threaten our clans!" Crookedstar snarled with hackles raised.

Every cat in Fourtrees started yowling. Cats turned on one another and Hopepaw saw the fragile peace nearly shatter. She stood closer to Bramblepaw and Owlpaw, eyeing the other apprentices. One of the apprentices caught her eye. It was a long-haired silver tabby she-cat with crystal blue eyes. Something about her was familiar,

but Hopepaw couldn't tell what.

"Stop!" Tallstar yowled. "Keep the truce!" The WindClan leader turned to Tigerstar with an immense amount of self-control. "Tigerstar, what other news do you bring?"

Tigerstar cleared his throat and stood taller. He held a commanding presence over the clans. "We have three new apprentices: Hopepaw has been apprenticed to Thornclaw, Owlpaw to Whitestorm, and Maplepaw to Cinderpelt as a healer."

Tallstar spoke next: "We have two new apprentices: Skypaw and Cloudpaw. Also, Tawnyfur is expecting kits."

Now it was Crookedstar's turn. The large tom gave Tigerstar an angry look before he gave his news. "We have a new litter of kits. Briarnose has had four, healthy kits: Dewkit, Shimmerkit, Hailkit, and Turtlekit."

"Is there anything else?" Tallstar asked the two leaders. Tigerstar kept his mouth shut. "Then this Gathering is over." The three leaders leaped down from the Great Rock. No one stuck around to chat. The three leaders took their clans and left.

Hopepaw followed Bramblepaw and wondered about the Gathering. Were they all like that? Everyone was so tense and angry. Hopepaw placed one paw in front of the other and yawned. All she wanted was to sleep.

When the clan returned to the South camp, those that belonged to the North Camp left. Hopepaw was about to go to the apprentice den when Tigerstar called her name. Curious, Hopepaw trotted over to her leader and bowed her head.

"What is it that you would like to speak with me about?" Hopepaw asked respectively.

Tigerstar motioned for her to follow him into his den. The formidable dark leader sat in front of his nest and Hopepaw sat in front of him. Her ears were pricked forward in interest. What was it that Tigerstar needed to talk with her about, and so urgently?

"Hopepaw, I have something very important to ask you." Tigerstar rumbled. His amber eyes appeared darker in the shadows of the den. "In order to move forward with our mission to unite the clans, it is essential that we gain RiverClan's support."

"I don't understand, Tigerstar." Hopepaw stuttered, confusion glinting in her green eyes. "What could I possibly do to change their minds?"

"Hopepaw, what I am about to ask you must remain top secret. Thornclaw tells me that you diligently carry out orders." Tigerstar's eyes glinted, unnerving Hopepaw a little bit. "Hopepaw, I would like you to go to RiverClan undercover. I need someone on the inside that I can trust."

Hopepaw merely stared at her leader. He wanted *her* to carry out such an important task?! To spy on RiverClan? She felt mixed emotions, mostly excitement. It was such an honor that Tigerstar trusted her to carry out such an important mission!

"But why wouldn't you send Bramblepaw or Tawnypaw?" Hopepaw wondered.

"Crookedstar would never trust them since they are my kits." Tigerstar explained. "Unlike you who has a respectable mother in the eyes of the other clans. Well, do you think you could do it?"

Hopepaw took a deep breath and nodded. "Yes, I can."

Tigerstar smiled, darkness simmering in his irises. "Excellent, in the morning, I'll have a few warriors walk you to the border. You need to look scared, Hopepaw. They need to believe that you fled to find safety. Is that clear?"

Hopepaw nodded carefully, "Yes, Tigerstar."

Tigerstar looked pleased with himself. "Now, go get some rest. You have a big day ahead of you tomorrow."

A/N
What do you think of Hopepaw's mission? Share your thoughts in the comments and please vote!

Chapter 13

[image]

"Hopepaw, wake up." Someone prodded her with a paw and Hopepaw opened her green eyes. She saw that it was Thornclaw that woke her. "Come on, it's time to go."

The long-haired russet apprentice got to her paws and stretched before she followed Thornclaw outside the den. All of the other apprentices were still asleep, including Owlpaw. She studied her brother, knowing that it might be a while before she saw him again. Her gaze traveled to Bramblepaw who caused a pain in her heart. She would miss him as well.

Outside the shadows of the den, the sun was just starting to rise over the forest. Birds were chirping and a gentle breeze caused the trees to sway. Hopepaw saw that Tigerstar, Sandstorm, and Cinderpelt all waited to see her off.

Tigerstar watched her expectantly while Cinderpelt just looked outright nervous. Hopepaw approached her mother first. She didn't think through how hard it would be to say goodbye.

Sandstorm buried her nose into her daughter's shoulder and sighed. "Take care of yourself, Hopepaw. Come home to me." When the others weren't listening, Sandstorm whispered into her daughter's ear. "If you need someone, look to Graystripe."

Hopepaw stared at her mother in surprise. "Why Graystripe?" She wondered in shock.

Sandstorm shook her pale ginger head. "Just trust me." She backed away and Hopepaw looked to Tigerstar and Cinderpelt.

"If you need assistance," Tigerstar mewed, "There will be a hollow tree directly across from the Stepping stones. At its roots will be a rock. If you need to contact us, place a flower underneath the rock. We will meet you the night after at moonhigh."

"We're going to walk you to the border." Sandstorm said, motioning to Thornclaw. "Are you ready?"

Hopepaw nodded, "I think so."

Thornclaw led the way out of camp and Hopepaw stayed at Sandstorm's side. She missed being around her mother more than she realized. It felt nice to be at her side and she wished that it wouldn't be long until she could return. The forest was slowly waking up, and Hopepaw knew that she would miss this.

She would miss the cool shadows casted by the thick canopy. She would miss the forest animals and the way the wind whistled through the branches. Most of all, she would miss her mother, littermates, and Bramblepaw. Hopepaw hoped that she would be able to return soon.

Finally, the river came into view. The small group stopped before they emerged from the trees. Thornclaw turned to look at Hopepaw. "I trained you well, now it's time to prove your worth." He touched his nose to hers. "Make me proud." Then he backed off to let Sandstorm say goodbye.

"I'll miss you, Hopepaw." Sandstorm purred. "I'm so proud of you and the cat you've become. You're on your way to becoming a great warrior." Sandstorm nuzzled her. "At night, if you're feeling lonely, look up at the moon and know that I'm thinking about you."

Hopepaw purred and nuzzled her mother back. "I will. I'll miss you, too." Then she turned and padded out of the shadows. She glanced over her shoulder but she couldn't see Thornclaw or Sandstorm hidden in the shadows.

Hopepaw approached the fallen tree that served as a nice bridge across the river. She jumped up onto it and nearly fell into the river. The bark had been worn away and the smooth wood was all that remained. Hopepaw dug her claws into the tree and made her way slowly across to the RiverClan side.

She landed safely on the other side and scrunched up her nose at the soft, wet peat beneath her paws. How could RiverClan cats

stand walking in this? No wonder they had webbed paws! Slowly, Hopepaw made her way up the river. She kept her eyes out for a patrol since she didn't know where the camp was.

Suddenly, she heard a yowl and something heavy crashed into her. Hopepaw hissed and spun on her attacker. She faced a very dark grey, almost black, tom with fiery amber eyes. By his size, Hopepaw guessed that he must be an apprentice. Three warriors emerged from the reeds.

Hopepaw recognized two of them: one was the spotted she-cat named Leopardfur (who was also the RiverClan deputy) and Stonefur, one of the most notable warriors in RiverClan. She faced them bravely, along with a smoky black tom.

"What are you doing on RiverClan territory, apprentice?" Leopardfur spat. The spotted golden she-cat narrowed her eyes and circled her.

"I-I ran away." Hopepaw lied and she was surprised by how convincing she sounded. "I want to join RiverClan."

"Why?" Stonefur quizzed her, he looked genuinely concerned.

"Because," Hopepaw started sadly. "ThunderClan hasn't been the same after it became TigerClan. It's not a clan that I'm proud to be a part of."

Stonefur and Leopardfur shared a glance. Then Leopardfur looked back at Hopepaw. "Come with us." Hopepaw followed the three RiverClan warriors and walked alongside the apprentice.

He was older than her, Hopepaw realized, but not by much. The apprentice, who she found out was named Stormpaw, was Graystripe's son. Hopepaw had heard all about Stormpaw and his sister, Featherpaw. They were somewhat notorious in TigerClan along with their father, Graystripe.

Sandstorm's words echoed in Hopepaw's mind. Why would her mother ask her to trust Graystripe? That was like saying she could trust a fox! It confused Hopepaw more than she could say.

Finally, the camp came into view. It was an island, Hopepaw realized, surrounded by a shallow stream. The inside of the camp was obscured by bushes, reeds, and cattails. The RiverClan cats waded across the stream to the camp, but Hopepaw wasn't eager to follow.

She tentatively placed a paw in the water and shivered. Memories from her near drowning returned and she was frozen in fear. Hopepaw stared into the water and her green eyes stared back at her. Even though she could see the bottom, Hopepzw couldn't bring herself to move.

"Are you coming?" Stonefur asked, returning to check on her.

Hopepaw nodded and waded into the water. She tried not to think about how wet her fur would be. It would take her forever to dry off! How did the RiverClan cats do it?!

She peeked her head into the camp. It was a generous-sized clearing with dens scattered around the edges. At the center of camp was a fallen log that probably served as their Highrock. Hopepaw walked into camp and every cat turned to stare at her.

The eyes of every warrior, apprentice, and kit were on her. Hopepaw tried to ignore them, but it was nearly impossible. Sitting on the fallen log, in all his glory, was Crookedstar. The massive tom was even more impressive up close. At his side was Leopardfur.

"TigerClan apprentice, what is your name?" Crookedstar asked Hopepaw.

"My name is Hopepaw." She answered respectively. "My mother is Sandstorm."

Crookedstar studied her with narrowed eyes. "Leopardfur says that you wish to join RiverClan, is that true?"

Hopepaw nodded, "Yes. I don't feel safe in TigerClan anymore and I'm not proud to call it my birth clan."

Crookedstar considered her words for a moment before replying. "Very well, you may stay. At first, we will keep you under close

watch. You will have to work very hard to earn our trust, Hopepaw."

She dipped her head. "I understand."

Crookedstar seemed pleased with her answer. "Come here, Hopepaw."

Hopepaw padded forward until she stood in front of the large tabby. The eyes of a RiverClan were on her. She knew they were looking for flaws, anything that would put her in the wrong. Hopepaw held her head higher.

"Hopepaw, until you become a warrior and prove yourself honorable, you will train as an apprentice." Crookedstar's eyes surveyed the clearing. "Graystripe, you will mentor Hopepaw."

Hopepaw couldn't believe her ears. *Graystripe* would be her mentor? Of all the cats Crookedstar could've named instead! The clan didn't cheer her name or welcome her. They just studied her with judgmental eyes. This would be a very difficult adjustment.

A/N
Tell me what you think of the story so far? Do you like Hopeaw? Why or why not? Also please vote!

Chapter 14

[image]

Graystripe padded up to Hopepaw. The dark gray warrior studied her with a quizzical look. "So how's Sandstorm?"

Hopepaw gave him a look. "Why do you care about my mother?"

"I used to live in ThunderClan, you know. She was my friend." Graystripe answered, ignoring her hostility. "So, how is she?"

"She's fine," Hopepaw answered and she became sad, missing her mother already. "I wonder what she thought when she woke up and I was gone..."

Graystripe touched his nose to Hopepaw's forehead in an attempt to comfort her. She tried not to flinch away from him. "You did the right thing coming here, Hopepaw. TigerClan isn't a safe place anymore."

Hopepaw nodded, "I know." She shook those thoughts from her mind. "Can we begin training now?"

Graystripe's nose twitched with amusement. "Sure, let's go to the river. If you're going to live in RiverClan, you will need to know how to swim."

Hopepaw followed Graystripe out of camp and across the shallow stream. It went up to her bellyfur and she cringed. They traveled across the marshland and Graystripe led her down a slope to the riverbank. Here the riverbank was made mostly of sand and there were a few rocks jutting out from the river.

"I know that you fear water, you have a better reason than most cats," Graystripe mewed. "But you'll get used to it, who knows, you might even like it."

He stepped into the water and Hopepaw's heart started racing. She

followed Graystripe into the water since she didn't want to show fear. She missed Thornclaw, he wouldn't have asked her to swim after what happened.

"Once, I almost drowned, too." Graystripe mused and his amber eyes glazed over with memories. "It was leaf-bare and I was hunting with Fireheart, Cinderpelt, and Brackenfur. It was when Brackenfur was Brackenpaw and Cinderpelt was Cinderpaw-before she was hit by a monster."

Hopepaw stiffened at Fireheart's name. How dare Graystripe speak so fondly of such a traitorous cat?! Didn't he understand that Fireheart killed Bluestar? Even this traitor must've respected Bluestar. Sandstorm always told her stories about how honorable Bluestar was.

"I went onto the ice after a vole, or was it a mouse? I don't remember." Graystripe chuckled. "The ice cracked and I nearly drowned, but a RiverClan cat saved me. Her name was Silverstream."

Hopepaw pinned her ears. She knew this story, to some extent. Tigerstar used this story to explain how disloyal Graystripe was. He had chosen a cat from another clan instead of his own flesh and blood. Of course she didn't know the details, but the main plot remained the same.

Graystripe noticed her look because he stopped talking. "I'm sorry. Tigerstar probably told you that Fireheart killed Bluestar, didn't he? I was there at the battle, you know. But I left with the RiverClan cats, I had my kits to think of." Graystripe sighed and lowered his head. "Fireheart did not kill Bluestar, Tigerstar did."

Hopepaw flattened her ears in disbelief. "You're lying! You are a liar!"

"No, Hopepaw, it's true." Graystripe insisted. Somewhere in his amber eyes, Hopepaw saw his determination for her to believe him. Why would it matter? The past was in the past. Graystripe couldn't change what happened. "Fireheart was trying to *save* Bluestar."

Hopepaw shook her head. "It's not true...it can't be!" If what Graystripe said was true, then that made Tigerstar a liar. What other things had he lied about?!

"I'm sorry, Hopepaw," Graystripe sighed. "I believe that you've been taught a very twisted version of what happened. Allow me to tell you what *really* happened that day and every day before."

Hopepaw and Graystripe settled down by the riverbank. The dark gray warrior told Hopepaw about Fireheart, Firepaw at the time, and a cat named Ravenpaw. "Fireheart was born a kittypet in the twolegplace. His name was Rusty, and I was the first forest cat he'd ever met. Bluestar was the one that welcomed Rusty to join the clan and named him Firepaw."

"I became really close friends with him, Ravenpaw, too." Graystripe smiled at the happy memories. "We trained together and Tigerstar, Tigerclaw at the time, was Ravenpaw's mentor."

"The day that Firepaw arrived, Ravenpaw had been on a patrol with Tigerclaw. Ravenpaw ran back into camp and shouted 'Redtail is dead'. Redtail had been the deputy. Tigerclaw came back into camp with Redtail. Everyone thought that Oakheart, the RiverClan deputy, had killed him. But it was, in fact, Tigerclaw."

"Tigerclaw killed Redtail in the hope that Bluestar would make him deputy, but she made my mentor, Lionheart, the deputy instead. Lionheart was killed in battle and Tigerclaw finally became deputy." Graystripe shivered. "Firepaw and I knew of Tigerclaw's treachery. We had investigated because Ravenpaw insisted that it was Tigerclaw that had killed Redtail."

"Firepaw and I were forced to help Ravenpaw flee the clan because he was the only one that knew the truth. Tigerclaw would've killed him. In the final battle that killed Bluestar, Tigerclaw had sent out nearly all the warriors on patrol. He led a patrol of rogues and a few ShadowClan cats to attack the camp. Fireheart tried to save Bluestar, but Tigerclaw was too strong."

Graystripe lowered his head as if he were mourning Fireheart all over again. "Fireheart was my closest friend. Did you know that he

was in love with your mother?"

Hopepaw shook her head, "No, I didn't know that." Was Fireheart her father? Sandstorm had never named their father, so could it be him? Hopepaw felt a small thrill at the possibility of finally knowing who her father was.

"He's not your father, Hopepaw." Graystripe mewed and he lifted his eyes to her.

Hopepaw's heart sunk. "Do you know who my father is, Graystripe?"

Graystripe nodded, "Yes, I do."

Hopepaw became excited. "Well, who is it?! Who is my father?"

Graystripe met her eyes again. "Hopepaw, I am your father."

Chapter 15

[image]

"Hopepaw, are you alright?" Graystripe asked her worriedly. He stepped closer to her and touched his nose to her shoulder.

Hopepaw flinched and shied away from him, "Don't. Touch. Me." Her heart was racing. Everything in her mind swirled and she felt overwhelmed. It all made perfect sense!

That was why Sandstorm never named their father! That was why Graystripe saved her and that's why Tigerstar was suspicious of her! It was the reason Tigerstar sent her here, to get her close to RiverClan.

"My whole life is a lie." Hopepaw whispered to herself. "Fireheart wasn't a traitor, Tigerstar is a killer, and I'm half-clan..."

"Well, you're not half-clan because I have only ThunderClan blood in my veins." Graystripe reminded her. "Look, Sandstorm wanted to tell you, don't be angry with her." Graystripe's eyes looked very sad, so much so that Hopepaw felt some pity for him.

"How could you two break the Warrior Code like that?" Hopepaw expressed with sadness and disappointment. "You've taken two mates outside the clan!"

Graystripe took a step towards her. "Please, Hopepaw, try to understand. After Fireheart was killed, we sought each other out for comfort. We shared Fireheart as a friend and his death brought us closer. It wasn't our intention to have kits." Graystripe's yellow eyes suddenly were filled with pride and happiness. "But I see that you have grown into an amazing cat, and you'll be an even better warrior."

Hopepaw was choked up and she couldn't respond right away. She never imagined that she would meet her father this way. But somehow, it felt right. Graystripe was her father. She was okay with

that, she realized. *Graystripe is my father*, She told herself. *He is not a traitor, he is a wonderful warrior who took the fall for Tigerstar's actions.*

"So how are Owlpaw and Maplepaw? I was so proud to hear that Maplepaw was chosen to be a medicine cat." Graystripe purred.

"She's a healer, not a medicine cat." Hopepaw said. "TigerClan doesn't worship or believe in StarClan anymore."

Graystripe stared at her in shock. "Do you believe in StarClan?"

Hopepaw shook her head, "No, Tigerstar says that they're just tales told to kits to keep them well-behaved."

"StarClan exists, Hopepaw. There's proof." Graystripe promised her. "Some night, when the clan is sleeping, I'll take you to Highstones. Maybe, then, you will see that StarClan exists."

They returned to her training, a new bond between them. It made every moment with him more special and Hopepaw wished desperately that she could tell Owlpaw and Maplepaw. She wondered what they would say. Owlpaw would probably be skeptical and Maplepaw would be ecstatic.

By the time the sun was beginning to set, Hopepaw had a decent sense of swimming. She didn't hate it as much as she thought she would. She actually enjoyed herself! But when they headed back to camp and Hopepaw wasn't received welcomingly, she remembered that she was here on a mission.

Hopepaw was there to spy, to learn their secrets. She was supposed to get close to them and to get close to the heart of the clan: Crookedstar. The clan was eating and sharing tongues. Everything looked so serene.

Just before Hopepaw was about to walk off towards the apprentice den, Graystripe touched her shoulder with his tail. "Let's not tell the clan about this, not even Stormpaw and Featherpaw. I'll tell them when the time is right."

Hopepaw nodded and walked over to the fresh-kill pile. She was

about to grab a fish, the last available food source on the pile, when a smoky black tom named Blackclaw came and swooped it up. He flashed her a glare.

"You don't deserve our prey, TigerClan rat." Blackclaw bared his fangs at her and another tom, a dark brown tom named Loudbelly, came up behind her. She couldn't back away and she was trapped between the two intimidating RiverClan warriors. "What's your angle, fox-breath? Did Tigerstar send you?"

Hopepaw bared her fangs back at Blackclaw. "Nobody sent me, I'm here on my own accord."

"Is that what Tigerstar trained you to say?" Blackclaw sneered. "I bet you're here to serve as his little spy and to destroy RiverClan just like you did with ShadowClan!"

"Leave her alone!" The cat to speak, to Hopepaw's amazement, was Featherpaw. The small silver tabby apprentice came to stand at Hopepaw's side.

"Stand back, half-clan filth!" Blackclaw spat.

"Don't talk like that to my sister!" Stormpaw was suddenly at their side. *Sisters,* Hopepaw thought to herself.

"I won't have two half-clan apprentices disrespecting me!" Blackclaw snarled. "Move, or I'll make you!"

"Blackclaw," Graystripe padded over and he looked furious. "Don't talk to them that way. They're only apprentices."

"Trust a traitorous cat who doesn't know where he belongs to speak!" Blackclaw growled. He stepped closer and taller in front of Graystripe. "You're the reason that Silverstream is dead."

"Blackclaw, that is quite enough!" Crookedstar yowled, coming between the two warriors. "I want to see you in my den, now." The tom walked off furiously with the smoky black tom trailing behind.

Hopepaw turned to Featherpaw and Stormpaw. "Thank you for defending me."

"Don't worry about it," Featherpaw smiled. "I've got some extra fish if you're still hungry?"

Hopepaw glanced at Graystripe out of the corner of her eye. He looked beyond happy that his three kits were bonding, even if two of them didn't know it. She turned back to Featherpaw and nodded. "Yes please, thank you."

The two littermates led Hopepaw back over to the apprentice den. It was a shelter made from a fallen log and inside was plenty of room. They laid down outside the den and watched the clan.

"Go on, try it." Featherpaw pushed the fish towards her. "You haven't lived until you've tasted it!"

Hopepaw sniffed the fish and took a tentative bite. She scrunched her nose and swallowed. It didn't taste bad, just strong and kind of like the river. "It's...interesting."

Stormpaw chuckled. "It's an acquired taste, you'll get used to it."

"So, what's it like in TigerClan?" Featherpaw asked.

"Featherpaw!" Stormpaw hissed, "You can't just ask her about something like that!"

"No, it's fine." She told Stormpaw. Hopepaw thought for a moment on how to answer. "Well, kits are apprenticed at four moons because Tigerstar believes that kits should start younger. What you call elders doesn't exist for us. We serve the clan until our death."

Featherpaw and Stormpaw's eyes both widened. "But that's against the Warrior Code!" Stormpaw growled.

"We don't follow the Warrior Code, we follow what we call the 'Code of TigerClan'. It's like the Warrior Code, but different." Hopepaw explained. "And we don't have medicine cats, only healers."

"So you don't believe in StarClan?" Featherpaw whispered. "How awful!"

Hopepaw shrugged, "We don't know any different, but I would like to learn. The Code of TigerClan is not what I believe in. I'd like to learn the Warrior Code so that I can become a true warrior."

Hopepaw sighed, "When I was named an apprentice, Tigerstar changed the ceremony. Now, we say: 'until you draw blood like a warrior'."

"That's horrible." Stormpaw sighed. "It's not even a proper ceremony!"

Hopepaw smiled. "Well, I guess that I am here where I'm meant to be. Maybe StarClan have been guiding me my whole life and I never knew it."

A/N
Please let me know what you think! I love getting comments on the book. And please vote as well!

Chapter 16

[image]

The next morning, Hopepaw woke early to eat something before training. She went to the fresh-kill pile and found an appetizing mouse. It tasted like the forest and it made her a little homesick. No matter what, she felt that, in her heart, TigerClan would always be her home. She was a TigerClan cat at heart. That's where her kin was. *Well, and here*, she reminded herself, thinking of her father and two half-siblings.

"Hopepaw, today we are going to practice swimming and fishing again." Graystripe mewed as he came up to her. "All your other skills can be put on hold for now. If you're going to live in RiverClan, you need to know how to swim and fish."

She nodded her russet head. "Okay." Quickly, she finished her mouse and followed Graystripe out of camp. It surprised Hopepaw how much she looked like him. Although their pelts were different colors, they both had thick pelts and a dark dorsal stripe.

They crossed the stream and traveled down the slope to the river. Hopepaw looked past the river at the TigerClan forests beyond. She sighed, missing her home.

"I miss the forests, too." Graystripe said, making her jump.

"I do not!" Hopepaw argued.

Graystripe chuckled and looked at her with knowing eyes. "I used to look at the forest like that all the time, I still do." He suddenly looked very sad. "No matter what, ThunderClan is my home. But ThunderClan is gone, so where else have I to go?"

Hopepaw felt hopeless. What was she supposed to say? He's the one that left. Then she reminded herself that she was the one who left as well. She had no right to judge him, except she had consent from her leader...as a spy...

"ThunderClan might not be lost forever," Hopepaw mumbled, but it was a false spark of hope. Tigerstar's grip on TigerClan was so strong and nothing could diminish his power.

Graystripe shook his head. "I fear the day that Tigerstar sets his eyes on RiverClan, or even WindClan. One more clan under his power will destroy whatever balance remains."

Hopepaw glanced at Graystripe, her father. His yellow eyes contained sadness and fear. She saw how real his fear of Tigerstar and TigerClan were. If TigerClan took over RiverClan, Tigerstar would most surely kill Graystripe and his kits. She realized, with a sickening feeling in her stomach, that she fell into that category.

Should Tigerstar ever learn that Graystripe was the father of Hopepaw, Owlpaw, and Maplepaw, they would all surely perish. Sandstorm would most likely be killed as well for her traitorous act. But how could something so horrible feel so right? When Hopepaw looked at Graystripe, she saw herself reflected there. He was more a part of her then she could ever realize.

"Let's fish," Graystripe suggested, breaking the silence. He padded to the riverbank and crouched down at the water's edge. "Now, Hopepaw, when you're catching fish, you can't let your shadow fall over the water. It's the same thing as being downwind from your prey. Keep your eyes focused on the water."

Hopepaw nodded and took a similar stance next to Graystripe. She stared into the water and noticed shadows among the water that represented fish. Her stomach growled and she fought to maintain control.

"When you see a shadow, use your paw as a hook." Graystripe demonstrated, flashing a dark grey paw into the water. It happened so fast that Hopepaw was surprised to see a fish flopping on the riverbank.

"Now you try." Graystripe nodded to her.

Hopepaw crouched down on the edge of the riverbank and tried to keep her shadow from passing over the water. She had her paw

ready, hooked like a claw to snatch her prey. Beneath the surface she saw a shadow flicker and Hopepaw lashed out a paw but missed. Now her paw was wet and she had nothing to show for it.

She flattened her ears in frustration but didn't falter. Hopepaw saw another shadow and flashed her paw at the shadow. Surprisingly, she felt her claws hook into the fish and her paw swiped it out of the water. The fish landed on the bank beside her and flopped around. At first she was shocked that she actually caught one, but then her instincts kicked in and she gave it a deadly bite.

"Good Hopepaw!" Graystripe purred, and he seemed genuinely proud of her. "Fishing is a little strange at first, but you'll get used to it. Try again."

They fished for the rest of the morning and by the time they finished, Hopepaw had caught two fish. She felt so proud! The water didn't bother her quite as much but it was still uncomfortable. Graystripe gazed upon Hopepaw with glowing eyes.

"Excellent! You're a quick learner, Hopepaw," Graystripe exclaimed. "Let's head back to camp, I'm sure that you're hungry-I know I am!" Graystripe chuckled and picked up the fish he had caught. Hopepaw followed his lead and struggled to carry both fish at once. They were slippery!

When they arrived back at camp, Hopepaw noticed the eyes of the clan boring down on her. She set her catches on the fresh-kill pile and slipped away towards the apprentice den. Stormpaw and Featherpaw sat outside the apprentice den and each of them had fresh-kill.

"Good morning, Hopepaw!" Featherpaw exclaimed with bright blue eyes.

Hopepaw purred at Featherpaw, "Good morning."

Stormpaw simply gave her a nod but that was enough for Hopepaw to feel welcomed. She sat down beside them and watched the camp wake up. Warriors went out on patrol and hunting, elders bathed in the early morning sun, and Hopepaw watched four rambunctious

kits exit what she assumed must be the nursery. The four kits ran up to Hopepaw with bright, curious eyes.

"Good morning, kits." Featherpaw purred to them. "Does Briarnose know that you're outside?"

A blue-gray tom rolled his eyes. "Of course she knows."

Stormpaw growled slightly to the kit. "Be respectful, Hailkit."

Before Stormpaw was finished speaking, one of the she-kits padded up to Hopepaw. She was a pale gray with darker flecks and amber eyes. The she-kit sniffed the air. "You smell weird..."

"Dewkit!" The other she-kit, a silver tabby, gasped. "She can hear you!"

Hopepaw pinned her ears, unsure of what to do. They were just kits and they didn't know better...but it still hurt. She couldn't look them in the eye and she turned to eat her fish. Eventually, Featherpaw shooed off the kits who ran back towards the nursery.

"Sorry, Hopepaw," Featherpaw sighed, scooting closer. "They don't mean any harm."

Stormpaw nodded in agreement. "Kits don't think before they speak. Soon your TigerClan scent will be replaced with the scent of RiverClan."

Hopepaw lowered her head and muttered to herself: "I hope so."

Tonight she had agreed to meet with a cat from TigerClan since it was her second night. She had to give a report and even though she's only been here for two days, she already felt some sort of kinship here. It was probably because her *father* and *half-siblings* lived here. If she betrayed RiverClan's secrets, she would be putting them in danger.

Chapter 17

[image]

Stormpaw snored softly as he slept while Featherpaw made no sound at all. Just outside her den, Hopepaw could hear the sound of crickets chirping and a gentle breeze whistling through the trees. She could hear the stream that encircled the camp as it ran over smooth stones. Night had long ago fallen, but she needed to be sure the entire camp was asleep before she left.

Hopepaw turned onto her other side and let out a long sigh. Her paws were itching to run and she wondered who would be waiting for her. She lifted her head and glanced behind her to where Stormpaw and Featherpaw slept. Neither of them noticed when she got up and slipped out of the den.

The camp was silent as most everyone was sleeping, but Hopepaw noticed the dark shape of Blackclaw who guarded the camp entrance. She flattened her ears and slunk to the edge of the clearing to hide in the shadows. How was she supposed to leave the camp without Blackclaw noticing? She could sneak out through the dirtplace... Her nose wrinkled at the thought, but it might be her only option.

Hopepaw crept through the darkness and disappeared into the dirtplace. She held her breath while she crawled underneath the camp wall. Once she was free, she shook her pelt of any sand and stepped into the river. Hopepaw actually allowed her pelt to soak so that she could wash away her scent-she couldn't be found out.

Then she crawled up the opposite bank and headed deeper into RiverClan territory. She kept her senses alert for any RiverClan cats that might be on a midnight stroll or hunt. Hopepaw stayed in the shadows and moved at a brisk pace through the thin undergrowth.

Her sense of direction stayed true as she continued walking. The forest was alive with the sights and sounds of little nocturnal animals. She wished that she could stop and hunt, but she pressed

on. Eventually, the trees started to thin and the ground became damp. Up ahead, she could hear the river.

Hopepaw slid down a gradual decline towards the riverbank. She stopped once she reached the river and sniffed the air. There were no cats following her, she had made sure of that. Although Graystripe has been training her relentlessly to swim, she opted for the fallen log as her point of crossing.

The log was as slippery as before but, this time, Hopepaw was prepared. She dug her claws into the wood as she slowly inched her way across. The bank neared and Hopepaw leaped for the bank as soon as she could.

She headed to Sunningrocks which is where she was supposed to meet someone. The sounds of the forest welcomed her home and she relaxed a little bit. Hopepaw didn't realize how much she missed the forest until now and it pained her to realize that she would need to leave again.

Pale against the shadows, moonlight lit up Sunningrocks. Hopepaw trotted out of the forest and leaped onto the rocks. She arched her back and let out a yawn. While she waited, Hopepaw wondered who it would be to meet her. It could be Darkstripe since he was deputy, or one of the advisors. Or maybe it was Tigerstar himself.

From behind her, a twig snapped. Hopepaw jumped to her paws and spun around to face whatever threat awaited her. She flattened her ears and peered into the darkness. From the shadows came a pale ginger she-cat. Sandstorm!

Hopepaw leaped down from the rocks and rubbed against her mother's chest. Her purring was so loud and she couldn't contain her happiness. Even though it had only been two days, she missed her mother dearly. She couldn't wait to ask Sandstorm about Owlpaw and Maplepaw! But first, she had important business to discuss.

"How have you settled in?" Sandstorm asked Hopepaw with a purr.

Hopepaw answered with glowing green eyes. "They've accepted me

openly into their clan and they've no idea. I've already received a mentor and have been learning to swim and fish." She tested her mother to see how she would react.

Sandstorm tipped her head. "Oh, really? Who's your mentor?"

Hopepaw hesitated and then lifted her green eyes to her mother's. "Graystripe..."

Sandstorm blinked her green eyes and then narrowed them. "How has that been going? Has he been pleasant?"

Hopepaw growled with frustration. She didn't want to beat around the bush! She wanted an answer *now*!

"Mother, I know the truth!" Hopepaw snapped. Sandstorm gave her a confused look and so she took a deep breath. "I know that Graystripe is my father."

Sandstorm stared at her for the longest time and it felt as if the world had faded away to leave only them behind. The pale ginger she-cat looked unnerved and opened her mouth to speak but no words came out. Finally, she managed to answer. "Hopepaw, let me explain. You need to understand that we didn't intend to have kits-"

"So are you saying that Owlpaw, Maplepaw, and I are mistakes?!" Hopepaw growled, anger burning in her green eyes.

"No!" Sandstorm growled. "We bonded over the death of Fireheart because Graystripe was his best friend and...well, I loved Fireheart. But Fireheart wasn't a traitor!"

"I already know this," Hopepaw snapped. "Graystripe told me." Her stomach twisted and her heart ached with hurt. "Why didn't you ever tell us that Graystripe was our father?"

"Because, it was too dangerous." Sandstorm lower her voice and flattened her ears. "Graystripe was considered a traitor in the clan, hated by Tigerstar, and from a different clan. I wanted you and your littermates to live a normal life without the truth weighing you down."

"We could've handled it!" Hopepaw shouted, "*I* could have handled it!" She sat down and lowered her head, completely shut down. Hearing it from Graystripe had been surreal, but hearing it from her own mother made it more real and more painful.

Sandstorm touched her nose to Hopepaw's forehead. "I know, Hopepaw. I made a mistake, but you and your littermates are anything but a mistake. I love you, Owlpaw, and Maplepaw so much! If I could turn back time I wouldn't change a thing."

Suddenly, Hopepaw's expression became cold, hardened. "If you could turn back time, would you choose Fireheart?"

At this, Sandstorm's eyes became sad. She hesitated, "Hopepaw-"

"No, don't speak." Hopepaw sat up straighter and squared her shoulders. "Tell Tigerstar that I'll meet someone else here in a quarter moon. I'll have more information for him then."

With that said, Hopepaw turned her back on her mother and disappeared into the shadows. She raced away from Sunningrocks and leaped onto the fallen log. She crossed it quicker than before. When she glanced over her shoulder, she saw that Sandstorm was watching her with a sad expression.

Hopepaw walked away.

Chapter 18

[image] [image]

Stormpaw hit Hopepaw alongside the head and she reeled back from the impact. She quickly regained her balance and advanced on Stormpaw. They circled each other, teeth bared and tails lashing, but there lived a measure of playfulness in their eyes. Hopepaw had to remind herself to keep her claws sheathed-RiverClan didn't train like TigerClan.

"Strike now, Stormpaw!" Stonefur, Stormpaw's mentor, ordered.

Meanwhile, Graystripe called to her. "You've got this, Hopepaw!"

Stormpaw's face was only a whisker-length from hers. His amber eyes were alight with determination. He looked so much like Graystripe, but his mannerisms reminded her somewhat of Owlpaw. If only the two knew that they were brothers. Featherpaw and Maplepaw were similar in their kindness. Hopepaw figured she was somewhere in between: both determined and fearless while being compassionate.

She snapped out of her thoughts when Stormpaw lunged at her. Hopepaw dodged him and knocked her shoulder into him. But Stormpaw was bigger than her and older. Her weight was nothing in comparison to him. That was her mistake.

Stormpaw spun around and leaped onto her. He pinned her down by her shoulders as she stared up into his eyes. If is were a real battle, she'd be crowfood by now.

"Stop!" Stonefur shouted and he padded over to the two apprentices. "Well, done Stormpaw. That was well executed."

Stormpaw removed his weight from her and Hopepaw stood up. She shook the dirt from her pelt and tried to regain her dignity. TigerClan taught her better than this. She may be younger than Stormpaw, but she's been training since she was four moons old.

Stormpaw was probably only five moons older than her, give or take.

He distracted Hopepaw. Everything about him and Featherpaw fascinated her. She wondered what they would do, what they would say to her, if only they knew that they shared a father? Hopepaw couldn't fight Stormpaw, not even in training, without her mind wandering. She yearned in the very bottom of her heart to tell him the truth.

Graystripe padded up to Hopepaw. "What was that about? You should've known Stormpaw was stronger than you?" He didn't seem upset or disappointed, only concerned. His yellow eyes and concerned frown told her that.

"Sorry, Graystripe." She shook her head to try and clear it. "I guess I'm just a little tired today. I didn't sleep well last night."

"Why don't you take the rest of the day off?" Graystripe suggested as he sat down. He curled his fluffy tail around his paws. "But tomorrow we'll go at this again until you get it right."

She nodded and sighed in relief. "Thank you." Hopepaw turned to leave and disappeared into the forest. Stormpaw was still practicing with Stonefur and Graystripe. He and Featherpaw could easily be named warriors soon. Then she would be separated from them.

Hopepaw entered camp and saw that most everyone was sharing tongues. She paused, watching the clan's close, easy bond. It made her miss TigerClan. When would TigerClan allow her to come home? It had been an eye-opener to meet her father and half-siblings, but she missed her mother and her littermates.

"Hopepaw!" Featherpaw bounded over to Hopepaw, her eyes bright. "How was training?" She fell into step with Hopepaw as they walked towards the apprentice den.

"I faltered," Hopepaw admitted and hung her head. "Sometimes I don't think I'll ever fit in here."

Featherpaw gave Hopepaw a look of sympathy. "You're safe here,

Hopepaw. And we like you, Stormpaw and I." Her pink nose twitched with amusement. "To be honest, it's nice sharing the den with another she-cat. It's like having a sister."

Hopepaw cringed at Featherpaw's words. She wasn't far from the truth. "I like you, too, but I miss my mother and my littermates..."

Featherpaw settled down in the shade. "Tell me about them. Your mother is Sandstorm, right?"

She nodded and laid down in front of Featherpaw. "Yes, Sandstorm is my mother. She's so strong and compassionate at the same time. I want to be like her. I have two littermates: Owlpaw and Maplepaw."

"You're so lucky to have a sister," Featherpaw spoke wistfully. She listened intently with curious blue eyes.

"Maplepaw's great, but she's always been kind of sickly. Tigerstar made her a healer which is insulting in TigerClan." Hopepaw explained. "She may not be the strongest, but Maplepaw is very intelligent. Owlpaw is the strong one. Sometimes I think he wants to be just like Tigerstar."

Featherpaw wrinkled her nose. "How could any cat want to follow in Tigerstar's pawprints? He's evil!"

She shrugged and pondered Featherpaw's question. "He's lied to all of us and I suppose that we've fallen into denial. There must've been some that questioned Tigerstar's leadership, but anyone that speaks treasonous words are executed."

"Tell me more about Owlpaw?" Featherpaw laid her head on her paws.

"Well, he's strong and very brave." Hopepaw conjured an image of her brother in her mind. "He can be a bit stubborn and hot-headed, but I believe that he always means well."

Featherpaw purred in amusement. "He sounds a bit like Stormpaw. They have a lot in common."

More than you realize, Hopepaw thought to herself. She stood up and

headed over to the fresh-kill pile. Her belly rumbled and all she saw on the pile was fish. She missed mouse and squirrel.

"Nothing look appetizing?" A tortoiseshell she-cat purred in amusement.

Hopepaw huffed, "Is it that easy to tell?"

"You'll get used to fish." The she-cat promised. "I'm Mosspelt, by the way." Then she walked over to join Mistyfoot.

Sighing, Hopepaw picked a trout and carried it back towards the apprentice den. Featherpaw was gone and Hopepaw spotted her talking with Stormpaw. She longed to join them, but they deserved a brother-sister moment. It wasn't as if they knew she fit into that category.

Hopepaw quietly ate her trout in the shadows. She kept her eyes down until a shadow crossed over her. When she raised her eyes she was surprised to see Leopardfur. The RiverClan deputy looked down upon her with distrust.

"Crookedstar wishes to speak with you." Leopardfur mewed before walking away to join the other warriors.

Intrigued, Hopepaw headed towards Crookedstar's den. She stood at the entrance and made a noise to announce herself. "Come in," She heard him say.

Hopepaw pushed into the den and saw Crookedstar sitting with his tail curled around his front paws. His crooked jaw looked more distorted up close. She also realized how big Crookedstar was. He wasn't as big as Tigerstar, but definitely close.

She cleared her throat, "You wanted to see me?"

"Yes," Crookedstar raised his head, "Sit down, Hopepaw." She obeyed and sat down before the powerful RiverClan leader. "I've spoken with Graystripe and a few of the other warriors. They all say that you've settled in well. Graystripe says you already are showing great potential as a swimmer and fisher."

Hopepaw dipped her head in respect. "I'm trying. It's been hard and I would be lying if I said that I didn't miss my mother or my littermates."

"That's understandable," Crookedstar's gaze filled with sorrow. "But RiverClan is your clan now. Graystripe also says that you've taken to Featherpaw and Stormpaw?"

"Yes, they've been very welcoming." Hopepaw answered respectively.

Crookedstar became wistful and nodded slowly. "I was going to invite you to come to the Gathering tomorrow. Would you like that?"

Hopepaw hesitated. How could she see her family and pretend they meant nothing to her? To look Bramblepaw and her other friends in the eye and look away? It sounded very much like an assessment, one that Hopepaw would need to pass.

She dipped her head to Crookedstar, "I would love to attend the Gathering."

Crookedstar purred, "Good, you're dismissed now."

Hopepaw rose to her paws and exited Crookedstar's den. She felt pleased that Crookedstar trusted her enough to attend the Gathering, even if it probably was an assessment. They probably wanted to see how she would act around her former clanmates. Hopepaw returned to the apprentice den and decided to take a long nap.

~*~

A/N
Please vote and comment! Tell me what you think of the characters/storyline so far!

Chapter 19

[image]

"Faster, Hopepaw!" Graystripe growled as he lunged for her. She's been on the defense for a while now. It was hard for her to concentrate today! "C'mon! You can do better than that!"

Hopepaw dodged another blow of his. She was gasping for breath and her flanks heaved for air. It's been a long time since she's been pushed this hard. She was tired of being defensive, she wanted to be *offensive*.

She let out a growl and leaped onto Graystripe's back. Her claws dug into his long fur as she tried to stay on. He reared up to fall back on her but she jumped off in the nick of time. Hopepaw managed to land on her paws and slunk around Graystripe. Her movements like that of a snake.

"Better," Graystripe nodded as he circled with her. He went to lunge at her and she dodged, hitting his side. Then she dived between his paws and purposefully tripped him up. When he fell, she pinned him down beneath her paws. Her breathing was rasp but her eyes were alight with the fire of determination.

Graystripe smirked, "Now we're getting somewhere." He playfully shoved her off and sat up. They've been practicing since dawn and it was nearly sunhigh.

Hopepaw collapsed in the shade and tried to regain her breath. Graystripe padded over and sat beside her. "Crookedstar tells me that you've been invited to the Gathering."

She nodded slowly, "Yes, it surprised me." Then she hesitated before adding, "I think he means to test how I'll act around my former clanmates."

Graystripe huffed with amusement. "He did that with me, too. It's unreasonable for him to expect you to act completely hostile to

them-they're your family."

"So are you!" She shot back playfully. Then she frowned. "When can we tell Stormpaw and Featherpaw? I want them to know about me!"

Graystripe hesitated, "I don't know, I still think it's too soon. We should wait until you're more established within the clan."

She wanted to argue, but she didn't have the energy. "Can I go hunting? I want to see if I can catch some sort of forest prey."

"Not liking the taste of fish yet?" Graystripe huffed with amusement.

Hopepaw shook her head, "No, I think I'll always prefer forest prey."

Graystripe purred, "Very well. I'll see you back at camp." With that said, he disappeared into the forest. She was all alone to her devices.

Hopepaw raced off into the forest to pursue the enticing scents of forest prey. She stayed expertly hidden among the shadows, slinking from shadow to shadow. Her russet coat helped her hide but when she stepped in the sunlight, her pelt gleamed.

Sitting on a low branch, Hopepaw noticed a bird. She crouched down and stalked forward. The bird had no clue the danger it was in until she pounced. Hopepaw dug her claws into it and killed it with one bite. The smell of fresh prey made her mouth water.

She hid the bird and kept moving. By the time she was ready to head back, she had the bird, two squirrels, and a mouse to add to the pile. A few warriors gave her a strange look but she ignored them. Hopepaw took one of the squirrels for herself and settled in front of the apprentice den. Just as she was about to tuck in, Crookedstar called a meeting.

Hopepaw left her squirrel for when she came back. She found herself sitting by Mistyfoot and Heavystep. Her eyes turned up to Crookedstar. Then she noticed Briarnose emerge from the nursery with her four kits behind her. Were they being named apprentices?

Crookedstar's voice boomed across camp. "It is with great pleasure

that I name these four kits apprentices." He nodded for them to step forward. Hailkit stepped forward first. "Hailkit, until you earn your warrior name, you will be known as Hailpaw. Blackclaw will be your mentor."

The ceremony passed by quickly. Shimmerpaw was apprenticed to Mosspelt, Turtlepaw was apprenticed to Shadepelt, and Dewpaw was apprenticed to Heavystep. The four newly named apprentices stood up front with their heads held high. Hopepaw smiled to herself; they all looked to be promising warriors. After the ceremony, Hopepaw returned to her squirrel.

~*~

Night slowly befell on camp and the clan prepared itself for he Gathering. Hopeaw waited in anticipation alongside Stormpaw and Featherpaw. She was eager to see her littermates and Bramblepaw. Crookedstar joined them and they were on their way.

The clan moved like a wave through the forest towards the river. Once they reached the river, they followed it upstream. Hopepaw was told that there was a twoleg bridge that they used to cross the river. When it came into view, Hopepaw found herself shying away from it. She didn't trust anything made by twolegs.

After crossing the bridge, it wasn't long before Hopepaw could see Fourtress. It rose from the forest around it and the smell of the other clans was strong. She could smell TigerClan and her heart leapt for joy. Crookedstar led their clan down the slope into the hollow and the other clans watched them enter. They were the last clan to arrive.

Immediately, Crookedstar leaped onto the Great Rock with the other two leaders. Hopepaw sat beside Featherpaw and Stormpaw, but her eyes wandered the crowd for someone else. Tallstar started first and halfway through his news, Hopepaw felt a light touch on her shoulder.

She turned around and saw Bramblepaw. Wow did he look bigger! He was taller and looked stronger, but his eyes were the same. Bramblepaw motioned for her to follow him and she did so without

thinking.

Bramblepaw led her to the shadows while Tallstar talked on about the news of WindClan. When they were completely out of sight Hopepaw excitedly rubbed against Bramblepaw's chest. "I've missed you so much!"

He purred and his amber eyes glowed. "I've missed you, too. We were all surprised to wake up and find you gone. Then my father explained what you were doing and the whole clan admired you."

"Really?" She was surprised that Tigerstar had anything good to say about her.

Bramblepaw nodded, "Yeah, but I still missed you." He lowered his head as if he were embarrassed. "When are you coming home?"

Hopepaw sighed, "I don't know." She dropped her voice to the tiniest whisper, "I suppose when Tigerstar has enough information to overthrow RiverClan."

Bramblepaw bent his head to touch his nose to her forehead. "I miss you, Hopepaw."

She purred and blinked softly. "I miss you, too."

He touched his tail to her cheek before slipping out of their hiding spot. Hopepaw waited a moment before exiting herself. She headed back to Featherpaw and Stormpaw. Tigerstar was now talking.

"Where have you been?" Featherpaw whispered to her.

"I needed some air," Hopepaw answered with her eyes trained on her leader.

"TigerClan is proud to announce that Darkflower is expecting kits, the first to have genuine TigerClan blood since the father is Runningwind." Tigerstar stood taller. "TigerClan is strong but I fear that one of our apprentices has disappeared. Her trail ends at the RiverClan border."

Hopepaw shrunk underneath all of the stares from the cats

surrounding her. She guessed that this was Tigerstar putting on a show and she had to play along. Crookedstar stepped forward and faced Tigerstar.

"Your apprentice, Hopepaw, has come to RiverClan seeking refuge." Crookedstar's voice echoed throughout the hollow. "She is now being mentored by Graystripe and is adjusting well. Hopepaw *fled* a clan that she did not feel safe in."

Tigerstar took a menacing step forward. "Return the apprentice to us, Crookedstar."

"Not unless she wants to return," Crookedstar growled. He found Hopepaw among the crowd. "Well, Hopepaw, tell Tigerstar your decision."

Hopepaw stood taller with the eyes of every clan on her. She was shaking but forced herself to remain steady. "I am a RiverClan cat now."

Whispers echoed in the hollow and Hopepaw sat back down. Featherpaw leaned into her for moral support. Crookedstar continued with giving his news. He talked about the four new apprentices and how RiverClan was strong. Then the Gathering was over and Hopepaw returned with RiverClan.

Chapter 20

[image]

Hopepaw nibbled at the fish in front of her, but she didn't have much of an appetite. Since the Gathering, much of the clan watched her with unease and distrust. What more did they need of her to prove herself?! She had defied her former leader in front of all three clans!

Well, it was fake and part of Tigerstar's plan, but they didn't know that! As far as they were concerned, she was a poor apprentice that fled her birth clan. She didn't understand why they couldn't accept her. She's been here for almost half a moon and only a few cats have accepted her openly.

From behind her, Shimmerpaw and Turtlepaw exited the apprentice den. Shimmperpaw's pale gray pelt shimmered in the sunlight, the trait she was surely named for. The she-cat saw Hopepaw and padded over. "Have you seen Mosspelt?" Shimmerpaw asked her with inquisitive green eyes.

Hopepaw shook her russet head. "No, I haven't. She may have gone on the dawn patrol, and they'll return any moment now."

Shimmerpaw sat beside her with a sigh. She eyed the sunfish that Hopepaw was supposed to be eating. "Are you going to finish that?"

When Hopepaw shook her head, Shimmerpaw moved in to eat it. Hopepaw watched the younger apprentice with curiosity. She wondered what it was like to grow up without rumors surrounding your birth. Even in TigerClan, cats whispered about who fathered Sandstorm's kits. Hopepaw figured it was a luxury that she would never know.

Movement at the camp entrance caught Hopepaw's attention. It was the dawn patrol. The patrol consisted of Stonefur, Stormpaw, Mosspelt, and Briarnose. Almost immediately, Stormpaw made his way over to Hopepaw and Shimmerpaw.

"Good morning, Stormpaw." Shimmerpaw mewed softly. Stormpaw merely nodded to her before meeting Hopepaw's gaze.

"Have you seen Featherpaw?" Stormpaw asked her with concern.

Hopepaw shook her head, "No, I haven't seen her since last night." She thought a moment longer. Was Featherpaw in trouble? "Is something wrong?"

Stormpaw lowered his head. "I'm not sure, but she wasn't in her nest this morning and I didn't have time to go look for her."

This alarmed Hopepaw. If Stormpaw woke up before dawn for the dawn patrol and Featherpaw wasn't there, *still* isn't there, then that could be a problem. "Have you told Fath-I mean, Graystripe?"

Stormpaw seemed too stressed to catch her near-mistake. "No, I thought she would be back by now and that it wouldn't be a big deal."

Hopepaw stood up, worried for her half-sister. "She's got to be here somewhere..." Just then, Hopepaw noticed movement by the camp entrance. It was Featherpaw. "There she is."

The dark gray tom stomped over to his sister with his tail lashing angrily. "Where have you been?!" Hopepaw avoided looking at them since it was none of her business. But she still could overhear their conversation.

"I went for a walk this morning." Featherpaw mewed defiantly. "I wasn't aware that I had to tell you everywhere that I'm going!"

"I was worried sick!" Stormpaw growled, "I couldn't find you this morning and when I came back from patrol and you still weren't here, I panicked!"

"Okay, I'm sorry!" Featherpaw growled in return. "I only went for a morning stroll." She slunk away from Stormpaw towards the apprentice den.

When she passed Hopepaw, she got a whiff of Featherpaw's scent. She smelt like wild garlic. How did she end up smelling like that?

Cats only smelled like that if they rolled in it, and they only rolled in it if they had something to hide... Where had Featherpaw been, really?

Hopepaw shook her head as if to clear it and stood up. Graystripe was no where in sight so she decided that she might as well go on a walk. She left the camp and walked through the thin forest. Although she didn't have a destination in mind, she found herself heading to the river.

The soothing sound that the river made as it moved along calmed Hopepaw's nerves. She sat on the riverbank and watched the sunlight glisten off the surface of the water. A little downstream, she saw a fish leap. The reeds hid her from anyone that might approach her from behind, but she could see the TigerClan side clearly. She missed home more than she would admit.

Then the breeze picked up and a sharp smell found its way to her. Was that wild garlic? The scent was coming from the TigerClan bank. Hopepaw stood up and looked around her. She was alone.

Hopepaw dived into the water and swam to the opposite bank where she pulled herself up with the use of her claws. Once out of the water she shook some of it off before following the scent. The smell took her deeper into the familiar forest and she felt a small sense of déjà vu.

Finally, she found the source of the smell. There was a patch of wild garlic in a hidden glen. Hopepaw slipped into the clearing and looked around her. There were pawprints here, cat pawprints. She didn't remember TigerClan ever using this hidden bit of forest.

Two scents mingled together and it took Hopepaw a moment to place the scents. Then it dawned on her. One of the scents belonged to Featherpaw. What was she doing here on TigerClan territory? The other scent belonged to a cat very dear to her: her brother, Owlpaw.

Where they meeting each other here? More importantly, why? A sickening feeling came over Hopepaw. They didn't know the truth. It wasn't bad enough that they were from separate clans. They also

shared a father. Hopepaw felt sick. She could only hope that wasn't the case, but why else would they meet here in secret?!

Hopepaw left the glen and started to make her way back to the river when she heard something behind her. Suddenly, something, or someone, crashed into her from behind. Her attacker tried to pin her down, but she slipped from their grasp. Hopepaw managed to pin down her attacker and meet them face to face. Owlpaw?!

"Hopepaw?" Owlpaw gasped.

"Owlpaw!" Hopepaw immediately let him up. She was ecstatic to see him and momentarily forgot her recent discovery. She touched her nose to her brother's with a purr.

"What are you doing here?" Owlpaw asked her, "You could get into trouble if you're caught." His light brown tabby pelt looked darker in the shadows, but his green eyes still shone bright as ever.

"I-I was looking for something," She lied. "I was following a trail." Hopepaw purred towards her brother, "I've missed you so much! How's Maplepaw? Sandstorm?"

"They're both well," Owlpaw replied happily. "Maplepaw's getting stronger everyday and Cinderpelt says she's learning fast."

"That's excellent news!" Hopepaw purred. She felt a small amount of peace knowing that her weakly sister was doing alright.

Owlpaw's gaze softened. "We miss you, Hopepaw. When are you coming home?"

"When Tigerstar doesn't need me here anymore," Hopepaw answered. She touched her cheek to his. "I'd better go." She turned to leave but paused. Hopepaw looked back over her shoulder at her brother. "Owlpaw, what do you know of a RiverClan apprentice named Featherpaw?"

A look of surprise came over Owlpaw's face, but it was gone in an instant. "Nothing, why?"

Hopepaw stared at him for a moment. He was lying. "No reason,"

Hopepaw mewed. Then she turned and dived into the river. She swam back to RiverClan territory and headed back to camp.

Allegiances Updated

[image]

Key
[T] Previously ThunderClan
[S] Previously ShadowClan

TigerClan
Leader-Tigerstar: large, dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes and unusually sharp claws [T]
Deputy-Darkstripe: dark tabby tom with black stripes [T]
Advisors-
-Whitestorm: big white tom [T]
-Blackfoot: white tom with black paws [S]
Healers-
-Cinderpelt: dark gray she-cat [T]
-Runningnose: small gray and white tom [S]
Warriors-
-Frostfur: white she-cat with blue eyes [T]
-Oakfur: small brown tom [S]
-Goldenflower: pale ginger she-cat [T]
-Stumpytail: brown tabby tom [S]
-Tallpoppy: long-legged, light brown tabby she-cat [S]
-Wetfoot: gray tabby tom [S]
-Fawnstep: ginger she-cat with white flecks [S]
-Longtail: pale tabby tom with dark stripes [T]
-Willowpelt: pale gray she-cat with blue eyes [T]
-Jaggedtooth: huge tabby tom [S]
-Dawncloud: small tabby she-cat [S]
-Runningwind: swift tabby tom [T]
-Mousefur: small dusky brown she-cat [T]
-Littlecloud: very small tabby tom [S]
-Russetfur: dark ginger she-cat [S]
-Whitethroat: black tom with white chest and paws [S]
-Brindleface: pretty tabby she-cat [T]
-Brackenfur: golden-brown tabby tom [T]
-Sandstorm: pale ginger she-cat with green eyes [T]

-Dustpelt: dark brown tabby tom [T]
-Petalnose: tortoiseshell she-cat [S]
-Swiftwind: black and white tom [T]
-Brightflower: white she-cat with ginger patches [T]
-Thornclaw: golden-brown tabby tom [T]
-Ferncloud: pale gray she-cat with darker flecks and pale green eyes [T]
-Ashfang: pale gray tom with darker flecks and dark blue eyes [T]
-Sootfur: dark gray tom with amber eyes [T]
-Rainwhisker: black tom [T]
-Sorreltail: tortoiseshell and white she-cat [T]
Apprentices-
-Cedarpaw: dark brown tabby tom (mentor: Russetfur) [S]
-Rowanpaw: ginger tabby tom (mentor: Jaggedtooth) [S]
-Bramblepaw: dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes (mentor: Tigerstar) [T]
-Tawnypaw: tortoiseshell she-cat (mentor: Runningwind) [T]
-Owlpaw: light brown tabby tom with green eyes (mentor: Whitestorm)
-Maplepaw: ginger and white she-cat (mentor: Cinderpelt)
-Ravenpaw: black tom (mentor: Ashfang)
-Cloverpaw: black and white she-cat with green eyes (mentor: Brightflower)
-Hollypaw: light gray and white tabby she-cat (mentor: Dawncloud)
Queens-
-Darkflower: black she-cat (expecting Runningwind's kits) [S]
Kits-None

RiverClan
Leader-Crookedstar: huge light-colored tabby tom with a twisted jaw
Deputy-Leopardfur: unusually golden spotted she-cat
Medicine Cat-Mudfur: long-haired light brown tabby tom
Warriors-
-Blackclaw: smoky black tom
-Mosspelt: tortoiseshell she-cat
-Stonefur: gray tom with battle-scarred ears
-Mistyfoot: dark gray she-cat
-Loudbelly: dark brown tom
-Briarnose: long-haired tortoiseshell she-cat

-Heavystep: thickset tabby tom
-Shadepelt: very dark gray she-cat
-Graystripe: long-haired gray tom, formerly of ThunderClan
Apprentices-
-Featherpaw: long-haired silver tabby she-cat with blue eyes (mentor: Mistyfoot)
-Stormpaw: dark gray tom with amber eyes (mentor: Stonefur)
-Hopepaw: long-haired russet she-cat with a dark dorsal stripe and green eyes, formerly of TigerClan (mentor: Graystripe)
-Hailpaw blue-grey tom with amber eyes (mentor: Blackclaw)
-Dewpaw: dark gray she-cat with white flecks and amber eyes (mentor: Heavystep)
-Turtlepaw: brown tom with golden swirled-stripes (mentor: Shadepelt)
-Shimmerpaw: pale gray she-cat with green eyes (mentor: Mosspelt)
Queens-None
Kits-None
Elders-None

WindClan
Leader-Tallstar: black and white tom with a long tail
Deputy-Deadfoot: black tom with twisted paw
Medicine Cat-Barkface: short-tailed brown tom
Warriors-
-Mudclaw: mottled dark brown tom
-Ashfoot: gray tabby she-cat
-Webfoot: dark gray tabby tom
-Tornear: tabby tom
-Breezetail: cream-colored she-cat with blue eyes
-Onewhisker: light brown tabby tom
-Whitetail: small white she-cat
-Gorsefur: long-legged brown tabby tom
-Runningbrook: light gray she-cat
Apprentices-
-Crowpaw: black tom with blue eyes (mentor: Mudclaw)
-Skypaw: blue-grey she-cat (mentor: Ashfoot)
-Cloudpaw: white tom (mentor: Runningbrook)
Queens-
-Morningflower: tortoiseshell she-cat
-Tawnyfur: golden brown she-cat (mother to Tallstar's kits: Eaglekit

& Soarkit)
Kits-
-Eaglekit: dark brown tabby tom with a white-tipped tail & white face (mother: Tawnyfur)
-Soarkit: black and white she-kit with blue eyes (mother: Tawnyfur)
Elders-None

Cats Outside the Clans
-Barley: black and white tom that lives on a farm close to the forest
-Ravenpaw: sleek black cat who lives on the farm with Barley
-Butterfly: golden tabby she-cat
-Free: long-haired gray tom with a dark dorsal stripe and green eyes
-Rosie: tortoiseshell and white she-cat
-Sunny: golden tabby tom
-Maisie: black she-cat with white paws (expecting Oliver's kits)
-Oliver: pale gray tabby tom

Chapter 21

[image]

It's been a quarter moon and so tonight Hopepaw would go meet her contact. The sun was slowly beginning to set behind the trees and the clan readied itself for sleep. Hopepaw laid in her nest while she waited for her denmates to fall asleep. Shimmerpaw and her littermates were fast asleep, but Hopepaw wasn't sure about Stormpaw and Featherpaw.

She glanced over her shoulder and saw that they were indeed asleep. It was dark outside the den now, a perfect cover for her trip. Hopepaw slipped out of the den and headed for the dirtplace. It looked as if Heavystep was on night watch.

The dirtplace smelled, but Hopepaw ignored the smell and crawled underneath the bramble wall. Once she was outside the camp walls, she started to run. An owl hooted in the distance and there was a gentle breeze. Crickets chirped and small animals dashed around in the grass.

Hopepaw headed for the river and her heart filled with relief when saw the river come into view. It looked silver underneath the moon's glow and more calm, but Hopepaw knew better. She slipped into the water and let it help carry her across. Her swimming abilities were much better now and the swim was easy enough.

She reached the other side and shook water droplets from her thick pelt. Then she headed deeper into the forest to where she would meet a TigerClan cat. The forest felt so familiar even after a quarter moon and she didn't realize how much she missed it. Hopepaw neared the tree which served as the meeting spot. That's when she noticed a shadow sitting beneath the tree.

"Hello?" Hopepaw whispered. She stepped closer to see who it was. The shadow moved towards her and stepped into the moonlight. She recognized the dark tabby tom in an instant. "Bramblepaw!" Hopepaw exclaimed. She greeted him by touching her nose to his.

Bramblepaw purred at her greeting. "Hopefully I won't be Bramble*paw* too much longer."

"Tigerstar is going to make you a warrior? Already?" Hopepaw's jaw dropped. He had been made an apprentice only a moon before her!

Bramblepaw shrugged, "He mentioned it would be soon." He touched his nose to her forehead. "I'm supposed to bring you to the TigerClan camp." Bramblepaw motioned for her to follow, so she did.

They traveled quickly through the forest, weaving in between trees. Hopepaw's paws instinctively found the trails that used to be so familiar to her. She kept up with Bramblepaw without an issue, and soon the camp came into sight.

"Most everyone is sleeping except for Tigerstar, Darkstripe, Whitestorm, and Blackfoot. They'll be the ones that will speak with you." Bramblepaw explained. He led her towards Tigerstar's den.

"Come in," Tigerstar's voice demanded from inside the den.

Hopepaw stepped through the lichen with Bramblepaw by her side. She suddenly felt intimidated by the four large warriors before her. They were her clanmates, but she realized in that moment that she'd gotten comfortable among the RiverClan cats. She even smelled like one!

"It's been so long, Hopepaw." Tigerstar purred but it sounded more menacing than friendly. "What can you tell me about RiverClan?"

"Like where's their camp, how do they fight, good battle advantages?" Darkstripe added impatiently.

Tigerstar lashed his tail angrily. "We've been sitting here for a quarter moon and we need more territory to feed the clan. Once we have RiverClan, WindClan won't be difficult to defeat at all."

Hopepaw opened her mouth to speak but no words came out. She considered the consequences of telling Tigerstar everything she knew. It would result in the defeat of RiverClan. Tigerstar would certainly kill Graystripe, her *father*, along with Stormpaw and

Featherpaw. But if she lied...that would result in death for everyone she held dear.

"The RiverClan camp lies inland between the gorge and the Stepping Stones. It's surrounded by a shallow stream that any cat can cross. The warriors den is closest to the camp entrance and Crookedstar's den is the furthest." Hopepaw cringed as the truth spilled out.

"Excellent, and you know the way that they fight?" Tigerstar's amber eyes blazed. She nodded. "Good, I want you to come to camp every three nights to teach our warriors how they fight."

Hopepaw dipped her head in respect. "Yes, Tigerstar." She gave Bramblepaw a look and he nodded.

"Oh, and one more thing, Hopepaw," Tigerstar meowed. "When we take over RiverClan, you'll be named a warrior. Don't let me down."

Hopepaw sat straighter and her eyes gleamed. "I won't." A small thrill of excitement rushed through her veins.

Tigerstar nodded, "Very good. Now, return to RiverClan before they notice that you are gone."

Hopepaw stood up, bowed her head, and exited the den. Bramblepaw followed her outside and he smiled at her. "You're doing TigerClan proud. Come on, I'll walk you to the border."

Bramblepaw took off out of camp and Hopepaw raced after him. They ran side by side through the shadows, racing the wind. Hopepaw's heart raced in her chest and she's never felt more alive. It was as if nothing could catch them or hold them back.

After a good run, Hopepaw saw the river appear through the trees. She stopped and Bramblepaw paused beside her. Her green eyes turned to Bramblepaw and she sighed. "Can we meet up some other time?"

Bramblepaw purred, "I would love to." He thought for a moment. "Let's meet at the Stepping Stones in two nights."

Hopepaw smiled and licked his chin. "I'll be there," She purred before walking towards the river. Bramblepaw turned and disappeared back into the shadows.

Hopepaw was about to jump into the river when a familiar scent caught her attention. Owlpaw? She followed her brother's scent and felt a sickening feeling as she approached the glen. The thicket became thicker and Hopepaw paused. She peered from behind the bramble and into the thicket.

Owlpaw sat at the center of the clearing, the moonlight illuminating his pale brown tabby pelt. Was he meeting Featherpaw here? Her question was answered when the brush rustled. Featherpaw poked her silver tabby head from the undergrowth and stepped into the clearing. They greeted each other as if they were familiar.

Hopepaw watched as her half-sister and brother twined tails and touched noses. Featherpaw rubbed the length of her body against Owlpaw's chest and purred. Hopepaw couldn't watch anymore. She stepped from her hiding spot, clearly startling the two.

"Hopepaw?!" Featherpaw and Owlpaw both gasped. Then they exchanged a glance.

"Did you follow me here?" Featherpaw wondered, slightly angry.

Owlpaw frowned, "Why would you spy on us, Hopepaw?"

"I was on a night walk and I found your scent, Featherpaw." Hopepaw lied, "So I followed your trail here. Is this where you've been sneaking off, to meet *him*?"

"Excuse me, Hopepaw?" Owlpaw sputtered. He sounded angry, very angry. "You still shouldn't have spied on us!"

"You're lucky that I did before this went too far!" Hopepaw snapped at her brother. "Do you two have any idea how much trouble this could get you into?!"

"You're familiar?" Featherpaw asked both Hopepaw and Owlpaw. She sounded jealous as if she thought they might have been lovers.

Hopepaw laughed out loud. "He's my brother, Featherpaw." She narrowed her eyes. "We are going back to RiverClan, now."

"Don't tell me what to do!" Featherpaw argued.

Owlpaw touched his nose to Featherpaw's cheek. "Listen to her, it's fine. I'll see you again." Then he shot Hopepaw a glare before disappearing into the forest.

Featherpaw glared at Hopepaw but then it turned into a worried look. "You won't tell anyone, will you?"

Hopepaw thought a moment and weighed her options. "I won't tell, as long as you promise not to meet with him again."

Featherpaw narrowed her eyes. "But I love him."

Hopepaw nearly choked. "No, you don't. Love for a cat who lives in another clan is just an illusion. It can never amount to anything and is driven by desire. Nothing more."

The two she-cats were silent for a while until Featherpaw finally spoke again. "Let's get back to camp." Then the two swam across the river in silence and returned to their nests before the sun could rise.

Chapter 22

[image]

Darkness surround Hopepaw as she wandered through a forest with no stars. Her hair stood on her spine while she crept from shadow to shadow. What was this place? It smelled boggy and the air was heavy. She became aware of something following her.

Hopepaw started running, but she found that it didn't matter how fast she ran, she wasn't moving. Whatever it was, it crept closer and closer... Glowing eyes peered at her from the shadows. They surrounded her and she had no where to run.

"*Hopepaw...Hopepaw...*" The voices spoke together in one chorus, chanting her name.

She tried to run, but her legs were frozen in place. Her heart pounded against her chest as the glowing eyes came closer. Where was there to run? The shadows stepped into the light and Hopepaw realized that they were regular cats. Except these cats had a dangerous aura about them.

"Welcome, Hopepaw," spoke a dark voice. Stepping from the crowd was a pure black tom.

"A-am I in StarClan?" Hopepaw wondered as her voice shook. Did this mean that StarClan was real? Another thing that Tigerstar lied about?

The black tom chuckled as if she were a kit who asked something ridiculous. "No, this isn't StarClan. This is the Dark Forest and only the strongest cats come here when they die."

"What's your name?" Hopepaw asked bravely. She stood taller and faced the tom. "You know mine, so it's only fair."

"You're not here to negotiate." The black tom growled, his eyes gleaming. "I am here to remind you where your loyalties lie: in

TigerClan."

Hopepaw eyed the other cats surrounding her. They seemed to follow the black tom's lead. Unless he ordered them to, Hopepaw felt that they wouldn't harm her. She turned her head back to the black tom.

"I'm loyal to TigerClan." Hopepaw murmured carefully. Her neck fur stood on edge and her heart still raced with fear.

"Good, we wouldn't want you to forget why you're in RiverClan." The black tom purred, but it sounded diabolical.

Her fur stood up along her spine. "I haven't forgotten."

"If you stay on the right path, you'll be leader one day of the biggest, most powerful, clan in history. It can all be yours." The black tom circled her. "You can protect everyone you hold dear."

Hopepaw's heart leaped. If she became leader of TigerClan, she could protect *everyone*. Sandstorm, Owlpaw, Maplepaw, G*raystripe*, Stormpaw, and Featherpaw... She could protect the whole of RiverClan which she's grown surprisingly fond of.

"So, let's not forget our loyalties. Shall we?" The tom wondered, sitting down in front of her.

Hopepaw nodded and lifted her green eyes to him. "I promise I won't."

∼*∼

"Hopepaw? Hopepaw wake up!" Someone was shaking her and her eyes snapped open.

"Huh, what?" Hopepaw yawned and looked through narrow eyes. It was Graystripe.

"We're on the dawn patrol, so hurry up." Graystripe mewed before leaving the den.

Hopepaw groaned and stood up to stretch. Her other denmates were

still asleep and she envied them. She stepped out of the den into the morning. The sun hadn't even risen yet, but the forest was starting to wake up. She spotted Graystripe waiting with Loudbelly, Shadepelt, and Mistyfoot.

"Are we leaving now?" Hopepaw yawned to Graystripe.

Mistyfoot shook her head, answering before Graystripe. "No, were waiting for Crookedstar. He's coming with us."

Hopepaw sat straighter when she saw Crookedstar emerge from his den and pad over to them. She *had* to impress him. The large tabby tom surveyed the patrol and nodded.

"Let's head out," Crookedstar meowed and he led the patrol out of camp. "We are going to start with the TigerClan border and move our way towards WindClan."

Yawning, Hopepaw fell at the back of the group. She felt exhausted, almost as if she hadn't slept at all last night. But she had, hadn't she? The only strange thing about last night was her dream. That had only been her imagination, right? What else could it be? Or had she really sworn her loyalty to a dark power?

The patrol made its way along the river, renewing the scent marks as they went. Hopepaw kept her gaze trained away from the dark smudge of trees that was her former home. She marked her scent along with the others and she realized that she didn't smell like a TigerClan cat anymore. They passed Sunningrocks and the twoleg bridge before coming to the gorge.

Hopepaw had only seen the gorge a few times and each time had been brief. As the patrol marked along the gorge, Hopepaw had plenty of time to look down at the surging waterfall. The water crashed below, creating white water that looked terribly angry.

She crept closer to get a better look when the ground beneath her paws started to slip. Hopepaw's fur stood on end as she started to fall. A yowl escaped her jaws just before she felt strong teeth bury into her scruff. Hopepaw hung there, suspended in the air, with the hungry river roaring below.

Crookedstar came to her side and took more of her scruff to help Graystripe haul her up. They didn't stop pulling until the tip of her tail touched solid ground. She was shaking and her heart raced inside her chest. The others were gathered around her in worry.

"Hopepaw, are you alright?!" It was Graystripe who asked the question.

Slowly, she nodded. She had to, even if it was a lie. She didn't want him to worry. "Just a little shaken."

"You should've known better than to get too close to the edge!" Graystripe growled, a hint of anger in his voice. "What would I have done if you fell, never to be seen again?!"

Everyone else looking on would've assumed that he was worried because he was her mentor. They didn't realize how direct he was being. Hopepaw sat up and faced Graystripe. In his eyes, she saw worry that could rival that of any parent.

"I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking." She murmured, lowering her head. "It won't happen again."

Graystripe let out a long sigh. "I'm glad you're okay."

"That goes for all of us, Hopepaw," Crookedstar spoke up. "Whether you've realized this or not, but you've become apart of the clan. RiverClan is your home now."

Her heart warmed at his words only to be chilled again. She had a mission to do and his words shouldn't mean more to her than a means to complete her mission. Crookedstar wasn't her leader, Tigerstar was. Still, it felt good to hear him say that.

"Thank you, Crookedstar. I feel that I've finally found my place." Hopepaw lied, but it didn't all feel like a lie. She felt more comfortable here in RiverClan than in TigerClan.

"Maybe you should head back to camp," Crookedstar suggested. "That was quite a scare you had."

Hopepaw looked to Graystripe for permission. When he nodded, she

turned to Crookedstar with a nod. She turned and followed the river back to camp. Her heart felt light with the knowledge that Crookedstar accepted her as a clanmate, whether or not she deserved it was a different story.

Chapter 23

[image]

A/N
This chapter is dedicated to @Hawk_Sun , Thank you for being this book's biggest supporter!

~*~

Hopepaw crouched on the fishing rock with her eyes trained on the water. She could feel Graystripe's eyes boring into her filled with expectations. She's been in RiverClan for about a moon now and the entire clan accepted her. And tonight, she would meet with Bramblepaw.

A shadow moved underneath the surface and Hopepaw struck out her paw with her claws unsheathed. She scooped the fish from the water and it landed on the rock beside her. Hopepaw bit it once and it was dead. Then she looked to Graystripe for approval.

"Very good, Hopepaw." Graystripe purred. He padded over to her and she could see the pride in his yellow eyes. "You're turning into a very fine fisher."

"Thanks, Graystripe." Hopepaw purred back and her pelt felt slightly hot with embarrassment.

What Graystripe said was true. She was a *very* good fisher and had developed a love for the water. If only her TigerClan clanmates could see her now they might not recognize her. Hopepaw was finding it harder and harder to keep her mind clear on the mission. She was here to gain intelligence, not to be their clanmate. And, when the time came, she would need to fight *against* them.

"You know, Hopepaw, when no one's around," Graystripe hesitated, "You could try calling me 'father'."

Hopepaw looked around. There wasn't another soul in sight. "Okay,

uh, father." It felt weird to call someone that since she's never called someone father her entire life. But she realized how amazing it felt to know that her father was alive and well, not just some figment of her imagination.

"I think you're tired, Hopepaw," Graystripe meowed. "You've been working awfully hard lately. Let's head back to camp." He stood up and led the way away from the river.

~*~

Night fell over the camp slowly and Hopepaw watched the sun set behind the trees. She watched RiverClan return to their dens and nests for the night. When she looked up at the darkening sky, Hopepaw saw the first stars begin to come out. Everyone in RiverClan told her that each star was a fallen warrior in StarClan, but she couldn't quite fathom it.

She heard pawsteps from behind so she glanced over her shoulder to see the RiverClan medicine cat, Mudfur. The dark tom sat beside her and fixed his gaze on the stars. For a long moment, they said nothing to each other. Then Mudfur broke the silence.

"It's comforting, isn't it?" Mudfur murmured, "To look up into the stars and know that they're our warrior ancestors looking down on us?"

Hopepaw shuffled her paws in nervousness. What was she supposed to say? "In TigerClan, I was taught that StarClan didn't exist, that they were mere stories to entertain kits."

Mudfur turned his eyes on her. "Do you still believe that?"

Hopepaw hesitated, "I don't know. I'm not sure what I believe anymore. I feel like I have to live up to so many different expectations and I'm not sure who I am anymore or where I belong."

Mudfur nodded slowly, "I think that you've gone through a lot, Hopepaw. You're strong, stronger than most cats your age. But you have to know that you're safe here in RiverClan. This could be your

home, if you let it."

Hopepaw stood up and glanced at Mudfur. "I don't know what lies in my future, but I do know that I want to be more than just another warrior, you know? I want to leave my pawprint on the world."

"Well, I wish you good luck, Hopepaw. I'm here if you ever need to talk." Mudfur mewed before heading back to his den.

Hopepaw slipped out of camp before the night guard appeared. She ran through the forest, her paws swift even in the darkness. The forest looked more forlorn in the dark, but she didn't bother with fear. When the river came into view, Hopepaw dived right in. She felt the river help carry her to the other bank.

On the TigerClan bank, Hopepaw shook out her long-haired pelt. Then she headed deeper into the forest. She followed the familiar trail to the clearing where she and Bramblepaw had agreed to meet. When she stepped into the clearing, moonlight bathed her fur. The grass here went up to her bellyfur except for in the center-it was shorter there.

At the center of the clearing was a willow tree. It's vines flowed all the way down to the forest floor, creating a curtain. A few wildflowers grew here along with dandelions. A gentle breeze carried a new scent to her. Bramblepaw.

He stepped from the undergrowth and into the clearing. His dark brown tabby pelt shone brighter in the moonlight. The light reflected in his amber eyes, making them appear to glow. Bramblepaw purred when he saw her and he stepped closer.

"Hopepaw," Bramblepaw breathed. He was close enough for her to touch him.

She reached out and rubbed her cheek against his chest. "I missed you. How is TigerClan?" Hopepaw looked up at him with big, green eyes.

"Well, Sootfur, Rainwhisker, and Sorreltail are warriors now."

Bramblepaw announced. Then, sheepishly, he added: "Sandstorm and your littermates miss you."

Hopepaw's heart began to ache. "I miss them, too. Hopefully I can return soon."

Bramblepaw nodded, "What's it like living in RiverClan? I see that you're all wet. Do you swim now?"

Hopepaw purred with amusement. "Yes, I swim *and* fish. I'm actually quite good at it. I've got a great mentor."

"Yeah? Who?" Bramblepaw asked, his whiskers twitching.

Hopepaw hesitated, knowing what every TigerClan cat thought of Graystripe. "Well, my mentor is Graystripe..."

Bramblepaw stared at her for the longest time. "Graystripe? Why would they trust a traitor to train a new, mysterious apprentice? Are they mouse-brained?"

Hopepaw's heart throbbed with heartache. She couldn't win either way. "He's not a traitor, he's actually...very kind."

Bramblepaw snorted in disbelief and a certain menace appeared in his eyes. "You can't seriously believe that, can you? He was friends with *Fireheart,* the cat who *killed* Bluestar! Or have you forgotten?"

"I haven't forgotton!" Hopepaw argued defensively. "But, I don't know, maybe he's not as bad as everyone says he is?"

Bramblepaw stared at her for the longest time. "You've gone soft, Hopepaw. If I were you, I'd remember what clan you belong to." He sighed and stepped closer. "I didn't come here to argue with you."

Hopepaw shook her head. "Me neither." She leaned into Bramblepaw and took in his familiar scent.

"Do you remember when I promise you that you'd be my deputy one day?" Bramblepaw wondered.

Hopepaw nodded, "Yes, but that was a long time ago."

Bramblepaw leaned in closer to whisper in her ear. "I still mean it. When I'm leader of TigerClan, you'll be my deputy."

They laid there under the moonlight until the sun started to rise. Hopepaw left feeling warm in her heart and lighter on her paws. She crossed the river and headed back towards RiverClan camp. It didn't matter if she liked RiverClan, they weren't her clan. TigerClan was. *That* is where her future lies.

Chapter 24

[image]

Hopepaw laid in the sand only a fox-length from the river. The sun warmed her russet pelt and she closed her eyes in relaxation. Beside her, Featherpaw laid in the sun as well. A little closer to the river, Stormpaw sat and looked out at the water. Their mentors had given them the day off for working so hard and they all decided to spend it sunbathing and swimming.

"The sun feels so nice," Featherpaw sighed happily. Her silver tabby pelt shone bright under the sunlight.

Stormpaw nodded in agreement. "It's a beautiful day for swimming." He stepped into the water and dived beneath the surface. Hopepaw watched her half-brother disappear and then reappear further downstream. "There are so many fish down here!" He dived again, probably to try catching one.

Hopepaw purred in amusement. "Stormpaw reminds me of my brother."

Featherpaw stared at the river wistfully. "Stormpaw does remind me of Owlpaw."

Hopepaw gave her a sharp look. "You've stopped seeing him, haven't you?"

Featherpaw narrowed her eyes. "Of course I have." Hopepaw didn't believe her. She watched her half-sister in curiosity. How would she react if she knew that her lover, Hopepaw's brother, was also her half-brother?

Stormpaw broke the surface with a fat trout in his jaws. He swam to shore and dropped the fish at their paws. "It's for us to share."

Featherpaw's blue eyes lit up. "Thanks Stormpaw, I'm starving." She sat up lazily and took a bite of the fish. "Mmm, it's good."

Hopepaw narrowed her eyes at Featherpaw. Was she gaining weight, or was it just Hopepaw's imagination? Featherpaw's been awfully sleepy lately, and clumsy, too. Hopepaw sighed and stepped forward to take a bite of the trout. It did taste good.

"Featherpaw and I have our warrior assessments in a half moon." Stormpaw told Hopepaw. "Stonefur and Mistyfoot say we're ready."

"That's great!" Hopepaw exclaimed, honestly happy for them. They deserved to be warriors after all of their hard work.

She wasn't jealous since they were older than her. It just meant that she was closer to being a warrior, too. Would she be named a warrior by Crookedstar or Tigerstar? She guessed it would depend on if RiverClan had fallen by then.

Stormpaw worked the hardest out of all of them. He was extremely dedicated to his training, sometimes even training without Stonefur. Hopepaw would often see him hunting alone, swimming, or practicing battle moves. He would make a great addition to TigerClan. That is, if Tigerstar allowed him to live.

Featherpaw was also a hard worker. She may not practice as much without her mentor, but during training she was focused. Her swimming abilities were some of the best in the clan. Plus, she was compassionate and would make a great mother one day, bringing new life into TigerClan.

Hopepaw prayed to StarClan, if they existed, that Stormpaw and Featherpaw would survive the Merge. She hoped with all of her heart that Tigerstar would see what valuable warriors they'd make for TigerClan. He wouldn't judge them by their parents actions, would he? That uncertainty was enough to keep the secret that Graystripe was her father. If anyone knew, it could cost her her life as well as her littermates.

"I wonder what my warrior name will be," Stormpaw thought out loud.

"Me too," Featherpaw mewed wistfully. "I was kind of hoping that mine would be Featherstream, you know, after Silverstream..."

Hopepaw's heart clenched. "Do you remember your mother at all?"

Stormpaw shook his head, "We only know what others have told us. She was beautiful, a wonderful swimmer, and a great warrior. Graystripe says she had the biggest heart."

It was strange for Hopepaw for them to talk about their mother, her father's other mate. But she wouldn't argue or tell them that they couldn't talk about her. She realized that she had something they didn't: a mother who was alive and well. Even if her parents were separated and from different clans, they were both alive and loved her. That was more than they had.

"I'm sorry," Hopepaw murmured, lowering her head. "I understand how you feel. My father...well, I never met him. Sandstorm never talks about him and I don't know if he's dead or lives outside the clan."

Featherpaw scooted closer so that their fur brushed. "I'm so sorry, Hopepaw. I guess that Stormpaw and I are so lucky to have a father who loves us very much."

And at least you can be honest about who your father is, Hopepaw thought to herself, but she didn't say it out loud. "It's okay, I have a great mother and two littermates. I'm not completely alone."

"Sandstorm is a well-respected warrior," Stormpaw agreed. "Graystripe told us that he and Sandstorm used to be friends."

Hopepaw tried to act surprised. "Really?"

Featherpaw nodded, "Yes, he said that when they were apprentices he used to not like her but that she got better in time."

"You really don't know who your father is?" Stormpaw wondered, sympathy in his amber eyes.

Hopepaw wanted to them, she really did. With all of her heart she wanted them to know that they were connected by something more than friendship. She wanted to tell Featherpaw the biggest reason she didn't want her meeting with Owlpaw. Most of all, she wanted them to see her for what she was to them. She wanted to be their

sister.

But she had two littermates to protect from the wrath of Tigerstar. She had a mother to protect and herself. If things were different, she would've told them a long time ago. But they could never know, not while there was so much danger.

So she sat straighter, took a breath, and lied. "No, for all I know he's a rogue."

"I don't think he could be a rogue, Hopepaw." Featherpaw made softly. "You've got the biggest warrior heart I know and you couldn't be a rogue's daughter."

It meant a lot to hear her say that. "I hope that you're right." Hopepaw offered a small smile.

Stormpaw nosed Hopepaw. "Let's head back to camp." And so the three of them raced back to camp where Hopepaw could momentarily forget her problems.

Chapter 25

[image]

Hopepaw slipped out of the dirtplace as soon as the camp fell asleep. The forest seemed silent and the air was heavy. It felt as if the forest was holding its breath, as if it were on the edge of something powerful.

Above the tree branches, the half moon's light crept down towards the forest floor. The shadows were like claws that reached out for Hopepaw as she walked stealthily through the undergrowth. Her fur stood on end and she couldn't shake the feeling that she was being watched.

Putting one paw in front of the other, Hopepaw gradually made her way towards the river. TigerClan was waiting for her. She quickened her pace and weaved in between the thin trees. It wasn't long until she could hear the river.

The river shimmered under the moonlight and the sand appeared white. Hopepaw stepped into the water to discover that it was freezing cold. She waded in deeper until she had to start swimming. The pull of the current was strong, but Hopepaw fought it with expert strides.

She reached the opposite bank and pulled herself out. Her pelt was heavy and water-logged so she quickly shook out as much water as she could. Then she started to run through the forest towards TigerClan's camp. She followed the familiar worn-down trails until she could smell the strong TigerClan scents.

Hopepaw approached the camp to find Longtail guarding the entrance. He jumped when she appeared, but then he recognized her. "You surprised me, Hopepaw." Longtail huffed. "Next time, call out a warning. Tigerstar is waiting for you in the camp."

She nodded to him, "Thanks, Longtail." Then she slipped through the hole in the bramble wall.

Inside the camp, Hopepaw found half of the warriors awake and waiting for her. Tigerstar sat beneath the Highrock with Darkstripe, Whitestorm, and Blackfoot at his flanks. Sandstorm was the first to notice her. She raced toward her daughter, green eyes filled with joy.

"Hopepaw!" Sandstorm purred, "I've missed you!" She rubbed her cheek against Hopepaw's, but Hopepaw pulled away.

"I still haven't decided to forgive you," She whispered to her mother so that no one would overhear. Then she turned her bright green eyes to Tigerstar. "Hello, Tigerstar."

Tigerstar rose from his position to greet Hopepaw. His amber eyes gleamed in the moonlight and his black stripes glinted like razor-sharp claws. Darkstripe and the two advisors trailed behind him as if they were his guards.

Hopepaw could feel the eyes of the clan on her and she held her head high. When Tigerstar stood in front of her, she dipped her head out of respect. The dark brown tabby tom nodded to acknowledge her. Then he turned to face the gathered warriors.

"Tonight, Hopepaw will teach us the secrets of RiverClan's battle techniques," Tigerstar announced. "Then three days from now, the rest of TigerClan will learn as well. When the next full moon comes TigerClan will claim Fourtrees as our camp!"

The cheers from the warriors was deafening but Hopepaw didn't flinch. Her eyes surveyed the clan and she saw Thornclaw, Oakfur, Runningwind, Frostfur, Fawnstep, Brackenfur, and so many more. It's been so long since she's seen their faces. She spotted Bramblepaw among the crowd. Was he a warrior now?

"Alright, Hopepaw, teach us what you know," Tigerstar mewed and everyone's gaze found her.

She cleared her throat and stepped forward. Her russet coat gleamed in the moonlight and she stood confidently in front of her clanmates. Hopepaw realized that she probably smelled and looked like a RiverClan cat to them, and not just any cat, a warrior. She's

lost all trace of kit-fluff and has grown into her strong legs.

"RiverClan uses many tactics, some are similar, but many are different. One of their most common techniques is to curl your tail around one of your hind legs. It's harder to balance, but once you learn how it's a powerful skill. It takes away a limb for your opponent to grab." Hopepaw demonstrated by curling her tail around her leg and balancing on her back legs.

Her paws returned to the ground and she thought for a moment. "But RiverClan has mastered a much more powerful way of fighting...they battle in the water."

"How do they swim *and* fight at the same time?" Jaggedtooth huffed in disbelief. "They're strange but they're not StarClan."

Hopepaw acknowledged Jaggedtooth with a nod. "These battle techniques you'll need to practice in the stream. Sometimes, RiverClan cats will hold their opponent under water until they surrender. They can also use the current to escape their opponent's grasp."

She demonstrated a few things to the best of her ability without water. "If you really want to fight fair with RiverClan, you will all need to learn how to swim."

"Swimming is for fish!" Mousefur argued.

Hopepaw pinned her ears. Why wouldn't they listen to her? Isn't this what Tigerstar wanted? "I suggest that you all practice swimming in your free time. Try some of the tactics that I've shared with you. When you're swimming, you have to let the water carry you, don't tense up because then you'll sink."

Tigerstar came to stand beside her. "I want you all to practice the moves that Hopepaw showed you. Well continue this until moonhigh."

Each cat paired up with another and Hopepaw felt a burst of pride watching them practice. They hadn't known any of this earlier. This was all because of her. She suddenly felt sick. This was all because

of *her*.

"You're doing a good job, Hopepaw." Tigerstar meowed evenly. "Tell me, how is Crookedstar?"

"He thinks of me as a clanmate. I've gained their trust and they suspect nothing." Hopepaw hesitated, afraid to ask what she really wanted. "Tigerstar, when RiverClan is conquered, will anyone be executed?"

Tigerstar blinked in surprise but he quickly regained his composure. "Justice will be served where it's due." He cleared his throat and nonchalantly looked back towards the practicing warriors. "You're not having reservations about this, are you Hopepaw?"

"No!" Hopepaw answered quickly. She couldn't allow Tigerstar to think that about her. "No... I just, well, there's these two apprentices. They're the kits of Graystripe, but I was wondering if they could be spared. They would make wonderful additions to TigerClan."

Tigerstar studied her and narrowed his amber eyes. "Tell me more."

Hopepaw was surprised that she'd gotten this far. She turned to face Tigerstar and took a deep breath. "Stormpaw is brave, and very loyal. If we won his loyalty, he'd make a great asset. Featherpaw is kind and nurturing. I have no doubt in her mind that she would bring forth new life into TigerClan, good strong kits."

Tigerstar thought for a moment. "I'll consider your offer as long as you can guarantee their loyalty to TigerClan, especially Stormpaw."

"How do I do that, Tigerstar?" Hopepaw asked. What did he expect her to do?

An wicked smirk found Tigerstar's mouth. He turned his amber gaze on her. "Make him love you, Hopepaw. Love outweighs loyalty every time." Tigerstar stood up to check on his warriors and left Hopepaw speechless.

Was Tigerstar asking her to seduce Stormpaw?!

"Hopepaw..."

Her green eyes snapped towards the owner of the voice. It was Bramblepaw. He was bigger than the last time she saw him, more filled out and muscular. His muscles rippled underneath his dark brown tabby pelt and his amber eyes gleamed.

"Bramblepaw," Hopepaw purred, moving towards him.

"Not Bramblepaw, not anymore." He grinned at her. "I'm a warrior now. My name's Brambleclaw."

Hopepaw studied him in a new light. She could see a slight change in the way he carried himself, in a prouder manner. He stood taller and walked more confidently. Yes, she realized, it felt right that he was a warrior now.

"I'm happy for you, Bramble*claw*," She giggled and rubbed her cheek against his.

Then she looked up at the moon which was now almost directly overhead. It was time for her to leave. She licked Brambleclaw's cheek and sighed.

"I must go now, but I'll see you at the Gathering." Hopepaw promised him and she slipped out of the camp. Her paws carried her through the forest back towards RiverClan.

Chapter 26

[image]

It was the second morning after her visit to TigerClan and she woke early to swim. She needed to clear her head and surprisingly, she did that best in the water. Hopepaw still couldn't believe how well she's adapted to RiverClan's lifestyle. She loved the water and she has begun to take a liking to fish.

Hopepaw emerged from the apprentice den and stepped into the pale sunlight. It was just past dawn and the clan still slept. She stretched her legs and arched her back before padding towards the camp entrance.

Mosspelt appeared to be guarding the entrance. The tortoiseshell queen nodded to Hopepaw as she walked past. Hopepaw started at a trot as she followed the familiar trail that would take her to the river. Birdsong filled the air and a slight wind whistled through the trees. It made Hopepaw miss the forests of TigerClan.

She skidded down the steep incline towards the riverbank and stopped just short of the river. Hopepaw looked around and saw no one, so she slipped into the water. The cool water soothed her muscles and she closed her eyes in relaxation. She just stood there in the shallows, letting the river wash away her worries.

"Hopepaw?"

At the sudden voice, Hopepaw nearly jumped out of her fur. She spun around towards the TigerClan bank and saw Brambleclaw standing there. His whiskers twitched with amusement and Hopepaw calmed down at the sight.

"You scared me!" Hopepaw scolded him with a hiss. "Don't ever do that again!"

Brambleclaw purred and walked towards the edge of the water. "Hello to you too."

Hopepaw couldn't help it, she purred and relaxed. "What are you doing here, Brambleclaw? My cover will be blown if I'm seen talking with you. We agreed to talk at the next Gathering, remember?"

"I know," Brambleclaw sighed. He walked closer so that his front paws were in the river. It amused Hopepaw to see the discomfort on his face. "But I couldn't wait, I had to see you."

Her heart fluttered at his words and she swam strongly across the river until she stood in the shallows on the other side. "I miss you too, Brambleclaw, I miss all of you."

"I want you to come home," Brambleclaw sighed. "I kind of wish we could just take over RiverClan and be done with. Then you could be a warrior and we could...you know."

Hopepaw's stomach started doing somersaults. She played dumb. "Do what?"

"You know, have kits, start a family." Brambleclaw suddenly looked down at his paws, clearly embarrassed.

It baffled Hopepaw to see Brambleclaw, a confident TigerClan warrior, lost for words. Hopepaw closed the distance between them and rubbed her cheek against his chest. They were both purring and Hopepaw felt safe in the crook of his chest.

"I want that, too, Brambleclaw." Hopepaw murmured quietly. "Soon," She promised him. "Very soon."

"Hopepaw!" A voice called from RiverClan's side of the river. She recognized the voice as Stormpaw.

She flinched and turned her green eyes up at Brambleclaw. "I have to go, but I'll see you at the Gathering." Then she turned and dived back into the deep. Her strong strides swiftly carried her across the water.

Hopepaw reached the bank just as Stormpaw appeared from the reeds. His dark gray pelt seemed almost black in the shadows. His amber eyes brightened when he saw her.

"There you are! Featherpaw said I might find you here." Stormpaw stepped into the sunlight and padded towards her.

Hopepaw emerged from the river and shook the water from her pelt. "I came here for an early morning swim." She sat down and licked her dainty paws while Tigerstar's words coursed through her mind: "love outweighs loyalty, make him love you".

"So guess what? Stonefur said that I'm taking my warrior assessment today!" Stormpaw's eyes were bright with excitement. "Featherpaw and I are going to be warriors!"

Hopepaw's heart lifted and she purred. "That's great, Stormpaw!" She scooted closer so that her fur was brushing with his. Stormpaw tensed at their touch and Hopepaw became hesitant.

There's an imaginary line, Hopepaw, She told herself, *Once you cross it, you can never return*. Hopepaw leaned into Stormpaw's shoulder and he tensed. *I'm saving your life,* She thought to herself.

"What are you doing, Hopepaw?" Stormpaw murmured, his voice quiet and his eyes shy. He didn't move away.

She ignored her heavy heart and looked up at him. "I was so scared, so nervous to tell you before, Stormpaw. I always thought that you'd never look past the fact that I wasn't born RiverClan. But I'm not scared anymore, Stormpaw. I think that I'm falling for you." The lie burned in her throat, but she ignored the sensation.

Stormpaw's answer came soft: "I think I'm falling for you, too, Hopepaw." He gently nuzzled her shoulder.

Almost panicking, Hopepaw remembered Graystripe. He would question her and most certainly condemn them from being together. She couldn't let that happen.

"Stormpaw? Let's keep this to ourselves for now. I don't want the clan to know just yet." Hopepaw lied and then blamed it on something else "I'm afraid that the clan still sees me as a TigerClan cat and I don't want them to question your loyalty."

Her half-brother slowly nodded, "I understand, but the clan loves

you, Hopepaw. You're a RiverClan cat now."

She smiled and leaned into him. "I'm glad."

~

When they returned to camp, they didn't touch, they didn't share any sidelong glances. Stormpaw walked over to join Featherpaw so they could wait for their mentors. Hopepaw wished that they both passed their assessments.

Graystripe found her before she could reach the apprentice den. "Hopepaw, Crookedstar wanted to see you in his den."

Confused, Hopepaw nodded and followed her father towards Crookedstar's den. It was built around a fallen log that leaned against a boulder. They entered inside to find Crookedstar sitting with Leopardfur.

"Hopepaw, please, sit down." Crookedstar meowed. She obeyed and waited for Crookedstar to speak. Graystripe settled down beside her. "I'm sure you know, Hopepaw, that TigerClan has merged with ShadowClan. That's old news, but here are rumors that TigerClan has it's eyes set on RiverClan and WindClan as well."

She didn't know what to say, so she merely nodded and gave a small answer. "Those are the rumors I've heard."

"Tomorrow at sunhigh, I've arranged a meeting with Tallstar." Crookedstar announced. "I'd like you to accompany me, Hopepaw. It'll be you, Leopardfur, Graystripe, Stormpaw-granted he passes his warrior assessment-and Briarnose."

Hopepaw narrowed her eyes in confusion. "I don't understand, why would I be needed?"

"You can provide intel, tell us things about TigerClan that could stop Tigerstar's murderous conquest." Crookedstar looked her up and down with a serious look. "It is the last test of your loyalty that I need, Hopepaw. You could save lives."

Betraying RiverClan, betraying TigerClan. Since when did she

become a double spy? Maybe since she realized that RiverClan became her home.

"I'll come."

Chapter 27

[image]

Crookedstar called a meeting later that day and the clan gathered around. Hopepaw found herself sitting by Shimmerpaw and Turtlepaw. She kept her green eyes focused on Crookedstar, but then she noticed Stormpaw and Featherpaw sitting together. They were becoming warriors!

"Cats of RiverClan, today I ask our warrior ancestors to look down upon these two apprentices. They have trained hard to understand your noble code." Crookedstar turned his gaze to Stormpaw first. "Stormpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect this clan, even at the cost of your life?"

Hopepaw's eyes trailed over to Stormpaw whose posture was tall with pride. She saw the familiar gleam in her brother's amber eyes. "I do," Stormpaw meowed loud and clear.

"Then I name you a warrior in the eyes of StarClan," Crookedstar called. "Stormpaw, from this moment you will be known as Stormblaze in honor of your fiery courage and loyalty."

"Stormblaze! Stormblaze!" The clan cheered and Hopepaw joined in. From across the clearing, she could see Graystripe. He was cheering the loudest.

Crookedstar then turned to Featherpaw and spoke. "Featherpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to defend this clan, even at the cost of your life?"

Hopepaw watched her sister sit up straighter, her blue eyes shining. "I do," Featherpaw nodded.

"Then I name you a warrior in the eyes of StarClan," Crookedstar announced. "Featherpaw, from his moment on, you will be known as Featherstream." All those in the clan suddenly bowed their heads and Hopepaw followed their lead. "In memory of your mother,

Silverstream, who joined StarClan before her time. She was my daughter, and I'm sure she is looking down on you two."

"Featherstream! Featherstream!" Hopepaw joined the call without hesitation. They were her half-siblings. They shared a father. Even if they didn't realize if, they were connected to each other.

Stormblaze approached Hopepaw and almost reached our to brush her cheek with his, but then he refrained himself. Hopepaw was glad he remembered. "Congratulations, Stormblaze." Hopepaw purred.

"You'll be named a warrior soon," Stormblaze meowed as if he'd read her mind.

"I know," Hopepaw sighed. "I'm just impatient."

Featherstream joined them, but she didn't seem as happy as Stormblaze. Hopepaw could see it in her eyes. "What's wrong, Featherstream?"

Stormblaze became aware of his sister's unhappiness and moved closer to her. "What's wrong? You can tell me."

Featherstream raised her head and let out a long sign. "I'll have to move into the nursery soon...I'm expecting kits..."

Hopepaw's jaw gaped while Stormblaze seemed surprised. "You're expecting kits? You've only just become a warrior! Whose kits are they?" Stormblaze demanded.

"I-I can't say," Featherstream stuttered, but Hopepaw knew exactly whose kits they were.

Instead of being angry at her in front of Stormblaze, Hopepaw leaned in to comfort her. She could talk with her later. "Kits are a good thing, Featherstream. It doesn't matter who the father is."

Hopepaw and Stormblaze never left her side the rest of the day.

~*~

The sun rose the next day and Hopepaw woke early for training. Graystripe and her practiced battle moves, the same battle moves she'd show to TigerClan tomorrow night. They practiced until it was nearly sunhigh and then they returned to camp.

"Eat something quick before we have to leave with Crookedstar," Graystripe told her. Then he walked off to find the other warriors.

Hopepaw approached the fresh-kill pile and picked out a tasty-looking sunfish. She carried it back towards the apprentice den where Hailpaw, Dewpaw, Turtlepaw, and Shimmerpaw sat. The four littermates always ate together in the morning. It made Hopepaw miss her own littermates that much more.

She settled down in between Dewpaw and Hailpaw to eat the sunfish. Their silence made her feel uncomfortable but she pretended not to notice. Suddenly, Hailpaw spoke.

"We heard that you get to go on a special mission with Crookedstar," Hailpaw blurted out. His littermates gave him a look but he didn't flinch or stop talking. "Is it true?"

Slowly, Hopepaw nodded and looked at Hailpaw. "Yes, it's true."

Dewpaw piped up, her amber eyes gleaming with mischief. "I also heard that this mission is going to take place of your warrior assessment."

All four apprentices' eyes were on her. She felt smaller and vulnerable under their stares. Hopepaw sat taller and reminded herself that she had no reason to feel guilty.

"Yes, that's also true. Crookedstar will make me a warrior if the meeting goes well." Hopepaw admitted.

"But you're moons younger than Stormblaze and Featherstream," Turtlepaw pointed out. He was quite an intelligent tom. "They were named warriors only yesterday."

"I know, but I started training as an apprentice when I was four moons old in TigerClan, not six. So I'm two moons ahead, plus, I've worked very hard." Hopepaw growled slightly. "I deserve this."

The four apprentices didn't argue with her anymore and she quickly finished her fish. She ate the last bit when Crookedstar exited his den. He was accompanied by Leopardfur, Graystripe, Briarnose, and Stormblaze. They made their way towards the camp entrance.

Hopepaw hurried over to join them and somehow ended up in between Graystripe and Stormblaze. Crookedstar nodded and once they were all ready, he stood up and left through the entrance. Leopardfur followed right behind him wi Briarnose at her flank. Hopepaw trailed after Graystripe with Stormblaze right beside her.

They traveled quickly through the forest, following the river towards WindClan territory. The crashing water turned white as it hit the rocks and Hopepaw couldn't look down. If she fell, she'd be swept away by the strong current and bashed by the rocks.

Crookedstar led them to a twoleg bridge which was the only safe crossing. Hopepaw didn't dare look down, instead, she kept her eyes focused on Graystripe in front of her. She felt Stormblaze's fur brush against hers.

"I won't let you fall," He promised her in a whisper.

It should've made her feel better, but instead it made her feel worse. He shouldn't be promising her these things in that manner! They shared the same *father* for StarClan's sake which she still didn't know if it existed or not. Hopepaw simply ignored him.

Soon, they were on the other side and passed by Fourtress. They headed into WindClan territory. Graystripe had told her that they would be heading straight into WindClan's camp which would bode well for Hopepaw. She could tell Tigerstar all about their camp, too.

The moors were completely bare and the wind up here was stronger. Hopepaw felt as if she would be blown completely away. Stormblaze stayed at her side and she silently thanked him. They traveled for what felt like forever until Hopepaw could see a shallow dip in the ground surrounded by brambles.

The WindClan camp.

Crookedstar led the patrol confidently towards the entrance of the camp. A cream-colored she-cat guarded the entrance. She stood up when she saw them approaching and dipped her head in greeting to Crookedstar.

"WindClan's been expecting you, Crookedstar." The she-cat meowed and she led them through the entrance.

Hopepaw took in the entirety of the WindClan camp. It was small with brambles surrounding it all around. Old badger and rabbit dens served as dens which were fortified with bramble. A few kits stuck their heads out of what Hopepaw guessed to be the nursery.

She turned her attention towards the center of the camp where Tallstar stood proudly. At his side was his deputy, Deadfoot, a mottled brown tom who Hopepaw thought was named Mudfur, and a few other warriors.

Tallstar stepped forward in greeting, his black and white pelt gleamed in the sunlight. "Welcome, Crookedstar. We have much to discuss. You said that you brought someone that had information regarding TigerClan?"

Crookedstar nodded and turned to Hopepaw. "This is Hopepaw, she joined us about three moons ago as a refuge of TigerClan."

The eyes of the WindClan warriors were on her and Hopepaw strangely found herself standing straighter. "Tigerstar's goal is to unite all four clans. He thinks that will make the clans stronger."

"There are four clans for a reason," Tallstar growled. "What can you tell us about his plans of attack?"

Hopepaw hesitated and she felt Crookedstar's gaze burning into her. "I'm not exactly sure, but I know that he wants to claim Fourtrees. He's going for RiverClan next."

Her RiverClan clanmates started to whisper amongst themselves. Crookedstar cleared his throat. "Tallstar, I'd like to offer an alliance. TigerClan is two clans strong and we stand a better chance I'd our clans are allied."

Tallstar thought for a moment and nodded in agreement. "WindClan extends it's friendship in alliance with RiverClan."

Hopepaw noticed Crookedstar give her a small nod. She relaxed and became excited. She was going to be a warrior!

Chapter 28

[image]

When the patrol returned to camp, Crookedstar immediately leaped onto the TreeStump. He yowled, signaling the start of a clan meeting. Hopepaw settled beside Stormblaze and Featherstream. She suspected what would happen, but she couldn't assume.

The clan gathered around, curious and intrigued. Crookedstar sat tall and proud atop the TreeStump as he looked down upon his clan. Leopardfur sat at his side and Hopepaw met the golden-spotted she-cat's glare. Why did Leopardfur hate her so?

"Cats of RiverClan, today it is time for an apprentice to be made a warrior." Crookedstar beckoned Hopepaw forward and she walked forward with her head raised proudly. "This young she-cat came to RiverClan a fugitive with no place to go. She was lost at heart and inexperienced. But now she stands before you as a pure RiverClan cat. She's proved her loyalty time and time again in the service of RiverClan. Now it's time that she was named a warrior."

Crookedstar leaped down from the TreeStump so that he stood directly in front of Hopepaw. Her heart raced in anticipation. "Hopepaw, do you promise to uphold the Warrior Code and to defend this clan, even at the cost of your life?"

Hopepaw opened her mouth to answer but the words of the ceremony rang in her ears. Do you promise to defend *this* clan? If she promised and made this vow, she would be committing treason. But that's why she was here, right? RiverClan wasn't her clan, TigerClan was. She just needed to convince them that she was their warrior.

"I do," Hopepaw answered in confidence. *What will my warrior name be?* She wondered to herself.

"Hopepaw, from this moment on you will be known as Hopeflame in honor of your courage and your flame-colored coat," Crookedstar

announced. He touched his nose to her forehead. "StarClan welcomes you as a warrior of RiverClan."

"Hopeflame! Hopeflame!" The cheers of RiverClan filled Hopeflame with a sense of belonging. Her eyes found Graystripe among the crowd. His eyes were filled with pride, and not just because he was her mentor. His pride was that of a father's.

She dipped her head respectfully to Crookedstar before padding over to where Graystripe sat with Stormblaze and Featherstream. Hopeflame had wanted to thank Graystripe for everything, but she couldn't in front of them. So she thanked him for being her mentor instead.

"I'm so proud of you, Hopeflame." Graystripe purred. "You've turned into an excellent warrior."

"Thank you, Graystripe, for everything." Hopeflame met his gaze, hoping to show him that she meant *everything*. For being her father, for believing in her when no one else would.

She turned to Stormblaze and Featherstream. Her brother stepped forward and nosed her cheek. Hopeflame froze but relaxed when she saw that Graystripe had moved on. But Featherstream was still here and seemed surprised at their affection.

"Is there something going on that I should know about?" Featherstream asked in amusement. Her whiskers twitched and her blue eyes gleamed.

"There is," Stormblaze answered before Hopeflame could. "But we're not ready to tell the clan yet."

Hopeflame nodded in agreement, leaning slightly into Stormblaze. "We just want to wait for the right time."

Featherstream squealed. "This is great! My brother and my best friend! You'll have beautiful kits together!"

Hopeflame nearly choked on the air she was breathing. Stormblaze jumped and nosed her fur. "Are you alright?"

She nodded, "Yes I'm fine, I just need some air."

Hopeflame raced out of camp and stopped just as she reached the trees. She doubled over and tried to catch her breath. It didn't matter what Tigerstar told her, she would *not* allow herself to have kits with Stormblaze. There was already enough problems with Featherstream expecting Owlpaw's.

~*~

It was the next day and darkness fell over the forest. Crookedstar called off the names of the cats who would attend the Gathering. Hopeflame sat beside Stormblaze in the shadows where no one could see them.

"Leopardfur, Stonefur, Mistypool, Blackclaw, Shadepelt, Graystripe, Stormblaze, Featherstream, and Hopeflame." Crookedstar called out. "No apprentices for this Gathering with the high tensions." He leaped down from the TreeStump and the chosen cats gathered at the entrance.

Hopeflame sat and waited with Stormblaze and Featherstream. "Does Graystripe know you're expecting kits yet?" She asked Featherstream in a whisper.

"No, I'm going to tell him soon, though." Featherstream answered.

"How do you think he'll take the news when you can't tell him who the father is?" Hopeflame whispered.

Featherstream lowered her head. "I don't know..."

Suddenly, Crookedstar stood up and led the clan out of camp. Hopeflame kept pace with Stormblaze and Featherstream as the large patrol made its way along the river. They reached the twoleg bridge and Hopeflame found herself staying near Stormblaze.

Once on the other side, it was a straight shot to Fourtrees. Hopeflame could hear the voices of the other clans so she concluded that they must be the last to arrive. Crookedstar led RiverClan into Fourtrees and TigerClan and WindClan watched. Immediately, Crookedstar made his way towards the Great Rock and RiverClan

split up.

Hopeflame ditched Stormblaze without him noticing and went to find Brambleclaw. She searched the crowd for his familiar dark brown tabby pelt and unfortunately saw many dark brown tabbies. Her heart clenched with worry that he might not even be here tonight.

Suddenly, she felt someone brush against her. Hopeflame turned around and came face to face with Brambleclaw. She immediately began purring and looked around to make sure no one was looking. Then she brushed her cheek against his and he twined his tail with hers.

"I've missed you," Brambleclaw purred softly. "How are you?"

"I'm a warrior now," She told him proudly. "My name is Hopeflame now. How is everyone in TigerClan?" Hopeflame asked him.

Brambleclaw licked her cheek and her fur turned hot. "Darkstripe died in a training accident and now...Tigerstar made me his deputy."

Hopeflame's eyes grew wide. "Really? That's really unexpected but, um, I'm happy for you."

From the crowd, Hopeflame noticed two familiar cats. She immediately greeted them in extreme happiness. "Owlpaw! Maplepaw!" They greeted her in return and it was a big happy reunion. She hasn't seen Maplepaw since she left and her last encounter with Owlpaw was less than pleasant.

"It's Owlgaze now," Her brother meowed, puffing out his chest.

"I'm Hopeflame now too," She exclaimed. Then she turned to Maplepaw. Was this cat before her really her sister?

Maplepaw wasn't so scrawny anymore. Her ginger and white pelt gleamed under the moonlight and her amber eyes were bright. She looked healthy *and* happy.

"We've missed you so much, Hopeflame." Maplepaw meowed.

"Mother misses you too."

Hopeflame flattened her ears at the mention of Sandstorm, but then she remembered that they didn't know *why* she was upset with their mother. She was about to answer when the clan leaders called the Gathering to order. Hopeflame slipped away from them and went to find Stormblaze and Featherstream.

Tallstar went first. "WindClan has three new warriors: Crowfeather, Skybreeze, and Cloudpool. Eaglepaw has been apprenticed to Onewhisker and Soarpaw to Breezetail. Also, Runningbrook is expecting Onewhisker's kits."

Crookedstar spoke next. "RiverClan has three new warriors as well: Stormblaze, Featherstream, and Hopeflame. We also have four new apprentices: Hailpaw, Dewpaw, Turtlepaw, and Shimmerpaw."

All eyes turned to Tigerstar who stepped forward. His black stripes glinted in the moonlight and his muscles rippled beneath his dark brown tabby pelt. "TigerClan is strong. We have many new warriors: Cedartail, Rowanclaw, Brambleclaw, Tawnypelt, and Owlgaze. Darkflower is the mother of three new kits. Also, Cinderpelt is expecting kits and will be taking a break from her healer duties."

Sudden uproar filled the clearing from all three clans. Medicine cats couldn't have kits! Some cats even called for her to be exiled.

"Silence!" Tigerstar snarled, "Cinderpelt is not a medicine cat, she's a healer. In TigerClan, every she-cat must bear at least one litter in her lifetime. That's the code we follow. Ferncloud and Brightflower are also expecting kits."

Tigerstar bowed his head. "Also, Darkstripe was unfortunately killed in a training accident. I've chosen Brambleclaw to be the new TigerClan deputy."

No one spoke, not even a word. Deadly silence filled the hollow. Slowly, the clans started to disperse to find their clanmates. Hopeflame had to speak with Brambleclaw one more time.

She pushed through the crowd and found Brambleclaw just short of the Great Rock. His amber eyes brightened when he saw her. "I've got a message on behalf of Tigerstar."

He leaned closer to whisper in her ear. "Tomorrow night at moonhigh, TigerClan attacks. Come to the Stepping Stones to receive further instruction." Brambleclaw licked her cheek. "Soon we can be together."

Chapter 29

[image] [image]

The clan slept soundly, totally unaware of the monster that lurked across the border. Hopeflame laid in her nest beside Stormblaze. At some point through the night, he'd rolled over and now rested a paw over her stomach. He was so close that she could hear his heart beating and feel his soft fur against hers.

As moonhigh neared, Hopeflame squirmed free from Stormblaze's grasp and felt a twinge of anxiety. Her eyes fell across every sleeping warrior. She thought of how she was about to betray them all.

Blackclaw didn't like her at first, but he now treated her like an equal. Loudbelly and Heavystep followed Blackclaw's example, and Loudbelly was a pretty funny tom. Mosspelt was sweet and has always been friendly to her. Stonefur and Mistyfoot were both incredible warriors that she respected immensely. Briarnose was the gentle, care-giving mother of Shimmerpaw and her littermates. Leopardfur never liked her, and soon it would be justified.

And finally her eyes fell on Graystripe. Before coming to RiverClan, Hopeflame always imagined her father died bravely in battle or the worst case scenario that he was a rogue. She never imagined that her father lived just across the river with her two half-siblings who she loved very much. Hopeflame loved Stormblaze and Featherstream as much as Owlgaze and Maplepaw.

Now she would betray them all. She would betray their trust and ruin their lives as they knew it. Nothing would ever be the same. It was time for her hard work and deception to pay off.

Hopeflame nuzzled Graystripe and Featherstream, whispering her love to them. Then she reached Stormblaze. He loved her in a way that she never could. But her deception could save his life as well as Featherstream's. She nosed him gently so he'd wake up.

Stormblaze groaned and opened his amber eyes. "What is it, Hopeflame?"

"Do you trust me, Stormblaze?" She whispered to him.

He stared at her as if she'd asked if he had two tails. "Of course, Hopeflame. I love you."

Hearing him say that made her heart become heavy. The burden she carried would soon be lightened. "I'm going to use the dirtplace, I'll be right back."

Stormblaze nodded and dozed off again. Hopeflame watched his gentle face with a heavy heart. *I'm so sorry*.

She stood up and left the den for the last time. The moon in the sky was still mostly full as the Gathering was only yesterday. Hopeflame slunk among the shadows towards the entrance. It looked as if Loudbelly was guarding the camp.

Loudbelly jumped in surprise when she appeared. "Can't sleep, Hopeflame?" The brown tabby tom wondered.

Hopeflame shook her head, "No, I'm just going to get some fresh air." She exited through the entrance and disappeared into the forest, the tip of her red tail being the last thing Loudbelly saw.

The forest was silent, hushed. No wind moved through the trees or rustled the canopy. There were no birds or squirrels frolicking in the trees. Everything seemed frozen like before a storm. Despite the quiet, Hopeflame could feel the tension in the air, crackling like invisible lightning. Something big was coming, how could RiverClan not sense it?

She quietly made her way through the RiverClan forest, making not a sound. This forest would soon be filled with the screams of her RiverClan clanmates, dragged from their nests as blood spilled. Hopeflame shook her head. No, she could t think about that now. She had a job to do.

The sound of the river calmed her until she remembered what waited on the other side. TigerClan's warriors, silent and blood-

thirsty. Those were her *real* clanmates. They were the ones she'd be fighting alongside.

Hopeflame appeared from the reeds and stood at the Stepping Stones. She paused, waiting and listening. From the shadows beneath the trees, Hopeflame saw movement on the other side. Chills ran along her spine as she watched Tigerstar emerge with all the TigerClan warriors behind him. At his side was Brambleclaw, the deputy of TigerClan in all his glory. Hopeflame didn't recognize him.

She watched in amazement as Tigerstar and the other warriors waded into the river and swam towards her. They obviously took her advice about learning to swim. Soon they reached the bank and pulled themselves out of the water. They didn't look comfortable, but at least they could swim.

"Hopeflame," Tigerstsr dipped his head to her. "You're going to ambush whoever is guarding the camp. Then you'll accompany me and Brambleclaw to take out Crookedstar."

"Wait, take him out? Why can't he be made a warrior or an advisor like Blackfoot?" Hopeflame gasped.

"Crookedstar would never submit," Tigerstsr growled. "He cannot be allowed to survive this. Lead the way, Hopeflame."

Slowly, Hopeflame nodded. She turned and followed the familiar sandy trail that would take them back to the RiverClan camp. "The camp is surrounded by water, so they might try to take the battle in the water. Did the clan practice those moves?"

Tigerstar nodded, "Don't worry about us, Hopeflame."

The stream surrounding the RiverClan camp came into sight. Hopeflame stopped and turned to Tigerstar. "Wait here, on my signal."

Hopeflame composed herself before racing towards Loudbelly. "I think I saw a TigerClan cat at the river," She lied and tried to sound convincing.

Loudbelly perked his ears. "Maybe we should warn Crookedstar?"

She shook her head, "No, by then they could be gone. The two of us can handle them." Hopeflame started to race away and glanced back at Loudbelly. "Are you coming or not?"

The brown tabby tom hesitated but followed her. As soon as they reached the shadows, Hopeflame turned on him. She pinned him down and knocked him out with minimal injury. Seeing him lying there unconscious, it made her feel sick. But he was only the first of many to fall.

Hopeflame headed to where she left Tigerstar and her clanmates. "Let's move," She whispered.

Tigerstar led the way and she stayed at his flank with Brambleclaw on his other. "Whitestorm, you take Oakfur, Sandstorm, Jaggedtooth, Thornclaw, Swiftwind, Fawnstep, Russetfur, and Longtail to the warriors den. Everyone else go for the apprentices den and the nursery."

"There's no queens or kits in the nursery," Hopeflame told Tigerstar.

"Then fan out and make sure they're contained," Tigerstar growled. "Brambleclaw and Hopeflame are coming with me."

Whitestorm led his group towards the warriors den and Hopeflame stayed beside Tigerstar. They crept towards Crookedstar's den silently. Hopeflame focused on Brambleclaw to keep her mind off of everything.

Tigerstar slipped into Crookedstar's den and Hopeflame followed after Brambleclaw. The tabby clan leader was pinned down beneath Tigerstar's powerful claws. He raised his eyes to Hopeflame and recognition flared in his eyes.

"Hopeflame? Have you something to do with this?" Crookedstar asked, his voice angry and fearful.

She was shaking in her fur but she couldn't let Tigerstar or Brambleclaw see. Hopeflame waltzed up to Crookedstar and lowered her head so that she could meet his eye. "This was the plan

all along."

Chapter 30

[image] [image]

"I trusted you!" Crookedstar snarled, baring his fangs at her. Tigerstar stills held him down beneath razor sharp claws. Crookedstar choked out his next words. "I welcomed you into RiverClan and treated you like a clanmate!"

Crookedstar's words stung no matter how Hopeflame viewed them. She was about to speak when Tigerstar interrupted her. "Hopeflame, it's time that you proved your loyalty for good. Kill him." Tigerstar motioned towards Crookedstar who stood cornered at the back of his den.

Hopeflame's eyes met Crookedstar's, and she wished with all her heart that he could see how sorry she was. She lunged at him and pinned him down. Hopeflame had overheard Mudfur talking with Leopardfur the other day about how Crookedstar only had one life left. This was it.

Her fangs dug into his throat and she held him down with her strong claws. Crookedstar struggled and tried shoving her off. Hopeflame got up and watched as his crimson blood stained the den floor. Blood gurgled from his lips and his eyes suddenly glazed over. Crookedstar was dead.

Brambleclaw nuzzled Hopeflame's side. "I'm proud of you."

Tigerstar turned to them, "Let's join the battle." He raced out of the den and Hopeflame watched as he leaped onto Stonefur.

Hopeflame froze and took in the sight. The RiverClan cats were horribly outnumbered and confused. Leopardfur, Blackclaw, and Stonefur were desperately trying to hold back the wave of TigerClan warriors at the entrance. Stormblaze was glued to Featherstream's side as they fought Swiftwind and Longtail.

Blood completely covered the ground and screams filled the night

air. A deep chill settled over the camp and Hopeflame could see her breath. The RiverClan cats fought bravely but Hopeflame knew there was no hope.

"Fight alongside me, Hopeflame," Brambleclaw murmured.

Hopeflame slowly nodded. Brambleclaw was the only constant in this confusing mess she saw before her. She couldn't recognize who were her clanmates and who weren't. She's spent so much time in RiverClan that her loyalties have been blurred.

Brambleclaw charged and knocked into Leopardfur. Hopeflame followed his lead and leaped at Blackclaw. The black tom spun around claws unsheathed and his eyes widened when he recognized her. "Hopefl-" She didn't let him finish. Her claws raked him across the face and she snarled.

Blackclaw returned the blow and they were soon fighting for dominance. Hopeflame ripped Blackclaw's ears to shreds. Blackclaw snapped at her, grabbing her neck fur between his fangs. She slipped free and lunged. He tried to dodge her attack but Hopeflame leaped onto his back and bit into his throat.

The large tom reared back and crushed her beneath him. He sauntered over, tail lashing in rage. Just before he could claw at her exposed belly, Brambleclaw cut him off, snarling at Blackclaw. Hopeflame watched as the two toms balanced on their back legs to aim unsheathed claws at the other's face. Her heart clenched but Hopeflame ignored it.

She dived at Blackclaw, aiming for his tendons. He stumbled which gave Brambleclaw enough time to pin him down and take control. Hopeflame's eyes frantically searched the battlefield. She wasn't sure who she was looking for.

Blood covered the ground and some cats were slipping in it. The smell of open wounds made Hopeflame's nose wrinkle. She recognized the light brown tabby pelt of her brother, Owlgaze. He was struggling with the superior weight of Heavystep.

Hopeflame raced across the battlefield, diving and dodging cats and

bodies. She reached her brother's side and hissed at Heavystep, clawing him right across the eye. Owlgaze glanced at her and smirked. He obviously was happy to have her at his side.

They pushed Heavystep back until the tom was forced to retreat into the chaotic crowd. Hopeflame and Owlgaze paused to catch their breath. Owlgaze was panting but he couldn't calm down.

"Have you seen Featherstream?" Owlgaze wondered. "I can't find her anywhere."

Hopeflame suddenly felt angry. Maybe it was all the confusion, anxiety, and guilt that she's kept buried for the past moons, but she finally felt broken. "Why do you still care about her? She can never be your mate!"

"You're wrong, Hopeflame," Owlgaze growled. "When RiverClan merges with TigerClan, then we can finally be together."

"No, you can't!" Hopeflame hissed. They were standing at the edge of the battlefield. Hopeflame looked out at the screeching, clawing mess and felt overwhelmed. "You can never be with her, Owlgaze! She's our half-sister!"

Owlgaze stared at her, his green eyes wide in disbelief. "That's not possible. Our father would have to be..." Owlgaze looked out at the crowd and spotted Graystripe fighting alongside Stormblaze. "Oh...I feel sick..."

Hopeflame nudged her brother. "Let's focus on the battle, we can talk later." She dashed off to aide Tawnypelt who was being cornered by Mistyfoot and Mosspelt.

She ripped her fangs into Mistyfoot's shoulder. The blue-gray she-cat yowled in pain and her eyes widened when she saw Hopeflame. Her claws were lashing before Mistyfoot could say anything. The two she-cats became locked into combat while Tawnypelt took on Mosspelt.

Mistyfoot managed to pin Hopeflame down. "Why Hopeflame? How could you betray us like this?!"

Hopeflame bared her fangs and snarled her reply. "I was never a RiverClan cat!" The lie tore her heart. At some point along the way, Hopeflame had become a RiverClan cat. And now she had to remind herself where she truly belonged.

Suddenly, she was torn away from Mistyfoot. Hopeflame was faced with the angry yellow eyes of her father. Her stomach twisted and her heart clenched at the sight of the unmasked sorrow in Graystripe's eyes. He bared his fangs and cornered her.

"What are you doing Hopeflame?!" Graystripe sounded more betrayed than he sounded angry. Every word he spoke dripped with overflowing sorrow and pain. She could see the sadness written clearly across his face. "I-I trusted you. You're my daughter and I trusted you!"

Hopeflame opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out. Her throat tightened and her eyes watered. Everything inside her broke. She crumbled to her knees and looked up at the stars. Is this what StarClan planned for her? To have her heart torn in two?

Her green eyes looked into her father's eyes. "I'm so sorry, father!" Hopeflame cried. She stood up and started to slip away to return to the battlefield. "I'm so sorry."

Her vision blurred as she entered into battle. Hopeflame's claws tore into every RiverClan cat she used to call friend. She fought her hardest through the tears and the heartbreak. Faces blurred until she could see only through red as the blood trailed over her eyes.

She heard a devastated yowl from Crookedstar's den. "Crookedstar is dead!"

After that, the moral of the RiverClan cats plummeted. Their broken hearts could be seen through the pain in their eyes. Hopeflame stood at the center of the battle, surrounded by pain and blood. Right there, she noticed a lone figure sitting close by.

It was the black tom she saw in her dreams. He padded towards her and whispered in her ear. "This was necessary." Then he faded away.

"TigerClan!" Tigerstar yowled from atop the TreeStump. "Hold down RiverClan. I've got something to say."

Hopeflame noticed Featherstream, blood trickling from a cut above her eye. She padded towards her half-sister and gently pushed her to the ground. Featherstream stared at her in confusion.

"What are you doing?"

"Trust me."

Tigerstar stood atop the TreeStump, his dark brown tabby pelt making him look like nothing more than a shadow. His amber eyes glinted from the moonlight. His strong shoulders were silhouetted against the moon.

"RiverClan, Crookedstar has fallen." Tigerstar yowled. "You are outnumbered. Surrender to TigerClan and join the movement to make the clans stronger. Think about it, all four clans united? We'll be powerful and unstoppable."

Leopardfur was brought forward by Brambleclaw and Hopeflame watched as he shoved her to the ground. That wasn't the same tom that she loved. He had been hardened by the responsibility and pressure of following in his father's pawprints.

Hopeflame watched as Leopardfur raised her head to look up at Tigerstar. She uttered only a few words: "RiverClan surrenders."

Suddenly, Featherstream cried out an ugly, guttural sound that tore Hopeflame's heart. Featherstream slipped out of Hopeflame's grasp. When Hopeflame looked to where Featherstream was heading, Hopeflame's heart broke.

Graystripe lay, dying, at the center of the clearing.

Sequel

A/N
I've decided to write 'Hopestar's Choice' into a trilogy rather than one book. If I wrote it all into one it would probably be 100+ chapters. The sequel is called 'Hopestar's Choice: Book 2'.